

THE SPRIGHTLY ROMANCE OF MARSAC

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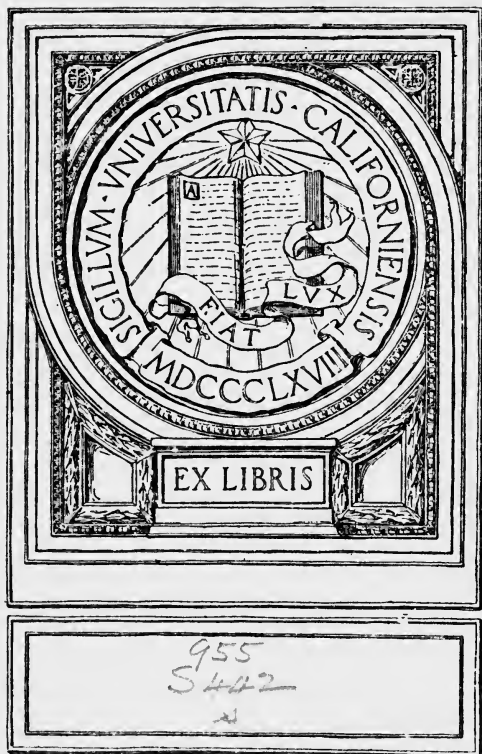


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MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL

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TO WHOM
ADDRESSED



*"Why were you so extravagant about bread?"
asked Marsac, very cheerfully working
away at the old screen.*

THE SPRIGHTLY ROMANCE OF MARSAC

BY

MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL

AUTHOR OF

"CHILDREN OF DESTINY," "A STRANGE SAD
COMEDY," "THROCKMORTON,"
"LITTLE JARVIS," ETC.

Illustrated by

GUSTAVE VERBEEK

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NOTE.

“The Sprightly Romance of Marsac”
obtained the first prize of \$3,000
for the best novelette in the *New*
York Herald competition in 1895.

List of Illustrations

	PAGE
<i>“Why were you so extravagant about bread?” asked Marsac, very cheerfully, working away at the old screen</i>	Frontispiece
<i>Madame Schmid was plainly in a rage</i>	2
<i>Madame Schmid grew still redder in the face and shorter of breath . .</i>	5
<i>It was easy enough to see who was the master mind</i>	9
<i>Madame Fleury entered</i>	17
<i>“Have you ever thought of marriage as a way out of your troubles?” .</i>	25
<i>Marsac, advancing to Fontaine, whispered in his ear</i>	37
<i>Marsac, taking his hand, led him to Madame Fleury</i>	39
<i>With a few bold strokes the bull-fighter assumed the appearance of a hale old gentleman of sixty . .</i>	48

List of Illustrations

	PAGE
<i>He fell over on his chair with amazement and chagrin</i>	50
<i>The two young men tore open the box .</i>	53
<i>They hugged each other and began to dance wildly</i>	56
<i>“Don’t speak of your fiancée in that disrespectful manner,” cried Marsac</i>	65
<i>He opened it without a word and took out four bottles of champagne . .</i>	67
<i>I saw these two poor creatures standing in front of a pastry-shop . . .</i>	68
<i>Marsac received them with as much kindness and respect as if they had been banker’s daughters . . .</i>	75
<i>Madame Schmid made a dash for Fontaine, whom she collared and dragged out</i>	77
<i>“And now about the villa,” said the old brewer</i>	83
<i>Monsieur Duval knelt down . . .</i>	89
<i>Monsieur Duval, closing one eye, playfully poked him in the ribs . .</i>	93
<i>The door opened, admitting Fontaine and two remarkably pretty girls .</i>	97

List of Illustrations

	PAGE
<i>The young people talked gaily together while sipping champagne . . .</i>	100
<i>"A hundred and thirty thousand francs!" cried Maurepas . . .</i>	108
<i>Marsac turned a double hand-spring over the sofa</i>	110
<i>Marsac, seizing her around the waist, began to waltz furiously . . .</i>	113
<i>They crept softly out of their apartment</i>	115
<i>As it brought Delphine's golden head quite close to Marsac's brown one, she consented willingly</i>	121
<i>"Ob, Madame Fleury!" cried Mar- sac, actually hanging his head . .</i>	129
<i>Madame Fleury pressed a handkerchief to her eyes</i>	132
<i>Marsac could scarcely restrain a shout of joy</i>	137
<i>Madame Fleury began eagerly searching on the ground for the letter . .</i>	139
<i>"Here," Marsac said, tearing the paper, "is half of it for you, Fon- taine, and dear Claire" . . .</i>	143
<i>Monsieur Duval's victoria, with Ma- dame Fleury in it</i>	145

List of Illustrations

	PAGE
<i>Fontaine, sunk in a deep armchair, was a picture of misery</i>	149
<i>He was a little old man clutching a rusty travelling-bag in his trem- bling hands</i>	151
<i>“Let me assist you,” said Fontaine, trying to take the old bag . . .</i>	159
<i>Marsac and Delphine were now left alone</i>	161
<i>Madame Fleury stood petrified for a moment</i>	175
<i>“The only thing for you to do now is to trust me,” said Fontaine . .</i>	177
<i>In walked one of the most weazened, cadaverous little men who ever stepped</i>	180
<i>Madame Fleury rushed out, dragging the unhappy Fleury after her . .</i>	188
<i>Marsac with his arm around Delphine’s waist</i>	194

THE SPRIGHTLY
ROMANCE OF
MARSAC

The Sprightly Romance of Marsac*



Chapter I

MADAME SCHMID, round and red, with the spotless lappets of her washerwoman's cap flapping angrily, was plainly in a rage; and the three loud whacks she gave at the garret door of 17 Rue Montignol caused two young gentlemen on the other side of the door to quake visibly. One of them, Fontaine, ran incontinently into a closet and hid, while Marsac, the other, after a ghastly pretence of a joke about Madame Schmid's whacks sounding like the three given at the Comédie Française before the curtain goes up, stalked

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The Sprightly

with dignity to a corridor door. But, Madame Schmid bouncing in suddenly, Marsac as suddenly whisked out of sight.



Madame Schmid was of that coarse, buxom beauty common enough in her class. She had one year been elected queen of the washerwomen, in that picturesque festival peculiar to Paris, and it had been said that fear of her stout arm and robust tongue had some share in her election. But she had a good heart, along with her vile temper; and as she planted her basket viciously on the floor, and whipped out a tremendously long bill, her quick eye took in the poverty of the surroundings, and she was softened in spite of herself. However, as one whistles going through a graveyard, so Ma-

Romance of Marsac

dame Schmid always stormed the more when her excellent heart prevented her from taking stronger measures.

The room was excessively shabby. A moth-eaten sofa, and a large but rickety table, covered with newspapers and the implements of the journalist's trade, were the principal articles of furniture. The light of a gray day shone dully in at the curtainless windows. A number of pipes, together with a cracked mirror, ornamented the mantel, while scattered about the room were a violin and case, an easel, and painting materials.

Madame Schmid belonged to that large class of persons who believe that a man who engages in any form of art is necessarily a loafer. The sight of the painter's tools, the violin, and especially the abundance of pens, ink, and paper, acted on her like a red rag on a bull, and gave her the excuse she wanted to raise a tempest. First, she exclaimed scornfully, —

The Sprightly

“Painters !”

Next, more scornfully still, —

“Fiddlers !”

And last, with a concentration of contempt that would have made her fortune at any theatre in Paris, —

“Journalists !”

Then she began to bawl, in a voice like an auctioneer, —

“M’sieu Marsac ! M’sieu Fontaine ! Oh, I know you are somewhere about ! This is an old dodge, running away when I come with my bill ! You owe me, both of you, for seven weeks’ washing. Seven weeks have I rubbed and scrubbed for you, and I have not seen the colour of my money yet !”

Madame Schmid stopped for a moment to take breath, and then, noticing the door leading into the corridor, darted to it and began to tug vigorously at the knob. But Marsac, who was holding it on the other side, was Madame Schmid’s superior in muscle, though not in weight, and the door

Romance of Marsac

resisted successfully. She then marched over to the closet door; but Fontaine followed Marsac's tactics, and Madame Schmid grew still redder in the face and shorter of breath, with no better luck than at the corridor door.

At that moment a very well-dressed little man entered the room, after an almost imperceptible knock, and, unrolling a bill about a yard long, began, —



“Gentlemen, I have a little bill here —” and then, raising his eyes, he said in a surprised voice, “Why, there are n’t any gentlemen here!”

“Not if gentlemen pay their bills, Monsieur Landais,” answered Madame Schmid, sarcastically, who recognised an old acquaintance in Monsieur Landais. Madame Schmid had had a good, obedient Alsatian husband, whom she had talked to death some years before, and

The Sprightly

Landais and the late lamented Schmid were from the same town.

Landais silently held out his bill, and Madame Schmid flourished hers in his face, with an air as if Landais owed the money instead of Marsac and Fontaine.

“Journalists are a bad lot, I can tell you,” rapidly began Madame Schmid, who liked to have the first as well as the last word, “and a lazy lot too. While you and I work for our living with our arms and our legs, Monsieur Marsac and that pretty boy Fontaine do nothing but sit in an easy-chair and write all day long. And they call that work !”

“I only wish I could sit in an easy-chair and amuse myself with a pen all day, instead of toiling over a cutting-board,” answered the tailor, ruefully.

“Painting and fiddling when they are not scribbling, — no wonder they can’t pay their wash-bills. I dare say they think washing is an elegant amuse-

Romance of Marsac

ment. I'm sure I don't know how I'll ever get my money. Writing them letters is a sinful waste of paper and ink."

"And calling to see them is a sinful waste of time. That Marsac always makes me laugh in spite of myself. The last time I saw him I put on a very determined air," here little Landais assumed a fierce look, "and asked him why my bill had not been paid. He told me that he and Monsieur Fontaine threw all their bills into a basket, and every six months they drew one out at random and paid that bill,—and it so happened they had never drawn my bill! It was a wretched joke, but it made me laugh; and I assure you, the first thing I knew I was asking the fellow if he and his chum wanted anything in the tailoring line!"

"And he chucks me under the chin, and tells me I'm so young and handsome I'll be getting married

The Sprightly

again ; and then, like you, I turn fool and laugh, and *pouf!* goes my bill," moaned Madame Schmid, wagging her head dolefully, while Landais shook his like a Chinese mandarin.

"Then," said Landais, wearily, "what are we climbing up all these stairs for?"

"God knows," answered Madame Schmid. "But I have no more time to waste on them, so I'll leave my bill and go."

"So will I," said Landais ; and they laid their bills on the rickety table and went out, Madame Schmid clacking angrily all the way downstairs.

The minute they disappeared, Fontaine slipped out of his closet, and locked the door after them. He was a handsome, fair-haired fellow of five-and-twenty, with the most winning air in the world ; but it was plain at the first glance that, with all his grace and intelligence, he was a man to be led by his affections.

Romance of Marsac

"I wish there was a drawbridge outside this door," he muttered, and then began to rummage about the room. "I wonder where Marsac's purse is," he continued to himself. "Ah, here it is,—and only two francs five centimes in it; and the shoemaker wants three francs for half-soling Marsac's shoes!" And then he began to call for Marsac, meanwhile going through the empty room of searching through his own pockets. In a moment Marsac entered the room.

It was easy enough to see who was the master mind there. Marsac was not so regularly handsome as Fontaine, but his dark bright eyes and captivating smile seemed to radiate brilliance all round him. After the first moment of seeing these two young men together, it was not necessary to explain their relations



The Sprightly

to each other. Fontaine could not look at Marsac without an almost feminine expression of fondness and tender reliance coming into his eyes; and at the bottom of his heart he thought Marsac the most brilliant, capable, and lovable of men. Marsac, on his part, could not look or speak to Fontaine without showing the affection of an elder for a younger brother.

They had been schoolmates, ten years before, at a provincial college. From the first moment of their meeting, they loved each other. Fontaine was of the best blood of the province; but he had neither father nor mother nor brother nor sister nor any near relative living. His was one of those hearts which must love something, and he could not help loving Marsac, — a tall, lithe boy, older than he, and quite able to fight Fontaine's battles as well as his own. Marsac, like Fontaine, was fatherless and motherless. He was educated from

Romance of Marsac

a fund for the sons of poor gentlemen, which the recipient was expected to return when he was able. After taking all the honours in his classes, and being graduated with the highest distinction, Marsac went to Paris along with Fontaine, both to seek their fortunes in journalism. They soon got work, but they made precious little money. Marsac, inspired with but one idea, sent every franc he made back to the fund, and repaid the sum advanced in an astonishingly short time. But it was at the cost of getting into debt on all sides. Neither he nor his chum had that commercial knack, that intimate knowledge of the purchasing power of a franc, which comes naturally to young men whose lives have been spent in a large city. Marsac was of a buoyant temper, and constantly expected something to turn up which would relieve them of all their embarrassments. Meanwhile, confident of the honesty of his intentions, he met his debts, duns,

The Sprightly

and difficulties with an incomparable archness and good-humour.

When Fontaine asked him for a franc for the shoes, his reply was, —

“A franc! Do you think I have a complete counterfeiting apparatus, that I can produce such a sum as a franc at a moment’s notice?”

“Then,” said Fontaine, ruefully, who would willingly have given his only pair of shoes to Marsac would he accept them, “I don’t know what I am to do. The shoemaker said three francs or no shoes, and I have only two francs five centimes. You have already spent enough on them to have bought a new pair, — new vamps in December, new uppers in January, and now in February new soles.”

“Go along with you!” cried Marsac. “Tell the shoemaker I have a bad case of confluent small-pox, and I dare say he will be glad to let you have the shoes for nothing. But give me that paste-pot. Our friends Madame

Romance of Marsac

Schmid and Monsieur Landais have left us souvenirs which I can put to use." And he began deftly cutting the bills, which were on stout paper, into square pieces to mend the screen with, which, like everything else in the room, had holes in it.

"I am afraid the small-pox story won't be a — judicious subterfuge," was Fontaine's reply.

"What did you do with the eleven francs we had yesterday?"

"I bought four bottles of wine, a box of cigars, and two loaves of bread with it."

"Why were you so extravagant about bread?" asked Marsac, very cheerfully working away at the old screen. "If you squander our substance on luxuries like bread, we sha'n't have anything left for necessities like wine and cigars. The fact is," he continued, "when a man enters journalism, he ought to have an education suitable to the profession. Instead of

The Sprightly

going to the University, I should have been taught the shoemaking and tailoring trades. How often have I heard that no learning comes amiss in journalism ! Now, if I had the most rudimentary knowledge of cobbling, I could have mended those shoes myself."

"At all events," said Fontaine, brushing his hat, "I am rather glad to be out of the way now ; for this is the very day and hour that Madame Fleury always appears to ask for the rent."

"There !" cried Marsac, for the first time showing impatience, "I have been trying for two weeks to forget what day the rent is due, and had just succeeded when you reminded me of it. I would rather see Joan of Arc coming at me full tilt on horseback, or Charlotte Corday with her dagger, than Madame Fleury with her bill."

"I have heard it said that it is possible to live comfortably on a large capital of debts, but we have not found

Romance of Marsac

it so," said Fontaine, still brushing his hat, which, however, not all the brushing in the world could benefit.

"But the debts must be on a respectable scale," answered Marsac, "something like seventy or eighty thousand francs. I don't believe, though, that everything we owe would mount up to ten thousand francs. I felt so humiliated the other day when one of the young fellows on the staff—a mere reporter, while I am an editorial writer—boasted of owing his tailor alone as much as we owe altogether. I could not help translating hundreds into thousands, and said I owed my tailor nearly seven thousand francs, when it is not quite seven hundred. But I saw that the youngster respected me more from that moment, and Maurepas, the editor-in-chief, asked me to breakfast the very next day. I was obliged to decline on account of these infernal shoes; but I said it was because I was sent for by the Minister of Public Instruction."

The Sprightly

“Marsac,” said Fontaine, after a pause, “how can you be so cheerful in the midst of our difficulties?”

“Have you not heard, my little man, that the laughing philosopher attained the goal of all wisdom, while the weeping philosopher stood whimpering at the starting-post? Does a long face pay a bill? Or a sour temper? Depend upon it, Fortune looks for the smiling faces; and so I try to keep mine ready to welcome her.”

Fontaine went out then, and Marsac, having finished the screen, took off his coat, and with a needle and thread began sewing awkwardly on it, whistling like a bird meanwhile. In the midst of it came a knock at the door, — not a whack like Madame Schmid’s, nor a tap like Landais’s, but a knock, delicate yet firm, polite but peremptory. Marsac turned pale. Nevertheless he hustled on his coat, and opened the door with his best air, — which was a very fine air,

Romance of Marsac

indeed, — and his landlady, Madame Fleury, entered.

Madame Fleury was a handsome woman of about five-and-thirty, with fine dark eyes, and a carriage full of grace and dignity; and, moreover, she exhibited a self-poise and self-possession which a prime minister might have envied. She was very simply dressed, as became the morning; but the simplicity was of the kind that costs. Marsac courteously placed a chair for her.

“I am glad to find you at home, Monsieur Marsac,” were Madame Fleury’s first words after the politest greetings had been exchanged. “I had not seen you go in or out for a day or two, and thought perhaps you were ill.”

“A trifle, a mere trifle,” answered Marsac, with much readiness; “a little



The Sprightly

dinner at a ministerial house, — those fellows give one such lots of champagne, — and I inherit gout, and it gave me a touch; so pray excuse my slippers. As soon as Fontaine returns, I shall put on my shoes and go for a little walk.” Then, seeing Madame Fleury’s handsome face assume its “business expression,” he hastened to add: “How wonderfully well you are looking! You are blooming like a rose.”

“Thank you,” answered Madame Fleury, calmly. “In a house like this, there are certain lodgers whom I am compelled to call on occasionally, in the way of business.”

“Do you know, Madame,” continued Marsac, who had not ceased to examine Madame Fleury’s features as if she were a beautiful portrait or a statue which he had never set eyes on before, “there is a picture in the Salon this year that might be taken for you? It is called ‘Springtime,’ —

Romance of Marsac

a young girl standing under an almond-tree in bloom. The girl's face — so fresh, so lovely — is simply yours."

Madame Fleury's discouraging reply to this was, "Business is business, Monsieur Marsac, and must be attended to."

Marsac kept on as if he had not heard a word. "I can't, for the life of me, recall the artist's name; but I remarked aloud, 'Madame Fleury must have sat for this charming face;' and a very distinguished-looking man who stood next me said in English, 'Then I would give a thousand pounds to know Madame Fleury!'"

"I wish you had accepted his offer," responded Madame Fleury, in a tone that would have disconcerted a Talleyrand, "for never in my life would a thousand pounds or even a thousand francs be more acceptable."

Marsac, however, not at all abashed, exclaimed enthusiastically: "Then, all you have to do is to offer to pose for a

The Sprightly

nymph or a goddess. Bouguereau and all those high-priced fellows will simply be tumbling over one another in their eagerness to paint you."

"Monsieur Marsac," said Madame Fleury, in a tone of velvet softness which Marsac perfectly understood and shuddered to hear, "I am talking business."

"And I am talking art," replied poor Marsac.

"If you will kindly recall the date," continued Madame Fleury.

Marsac, taking up an almanac, began turning the leaves. "This is the 20th of February," he mused. "Let me see — what happened on the 20th of February? Ah, I have it! It is your twenty-fifth birthday, and you have come to receive our felicitations."

"Nonsense, Monsieur Marsac!" replied Madame Fleury, with the same tone of deadly sweetness. "It is the day your rent is due; and I have come to see if you are prepared to pay it, and

Romance of Marsac

also the arrears of two months you still owe.”

Marsac merely shook his head, and for several minutes there was unbroken silence in the room, each meanwhile closely attentive to the other. At last Madame Fleury spoke.

“It seems to me that two young men with your talents and character,—for I have found you both to have good characters, except for this rent business,—and of good families, should be able to make a better living out of journalism than you do.”

“Ah, Madame,” answered Marsac, sorrowfully, “modern journalism has but one essential,—it requires a man to be an accomplished, ready, and felicitous liar; and neither of us is that.”

“Then why don’t you —ahem! —try to acquire that one essential?”

“Transcendent liars, Madame Fleury, like poets, are born, not made. And then there is a great deal in being notorious. Fontaine and I have done

The Sprightly

everything short of felony, to bring ourselves before the public ; but we have failed. We have tried to drown ourselves in the Seine, — with life-preservers on, of course ; but the police found the life-preservers on us, and instead of making us favourably known, humph ! — we were glad enough to hush up the affair. We have brought the most horrible charges against each other in print, but nobody appeared at all surprised at them ; and the public, by its indifference, seemed to take it for granted that the worst was true. The only newspaper which took the trouble to investigate it sent a reporter here ; and as ill-luck would have it, the fellow caught us waltzing in each other's arms for joy because we had just got a dinner invitation, — and we had not had anything that could be called a dinner for three weeks. Our circumstances are indeed desperate. Yesterday we had some money, and Fontaine bought two loaves of bread. I reproached him for

Romance of Marsac

his extravagance in buying so much bread.”

With these words Marsac managed to cover dexterously a box of cigars on the table, which Madame Fleury had not noticed.

“That is, indeed, poverty,” said Madame Fleury, with some feeling; and Marsac, seeing she was a little touched, continued eagerly, —

“We have tried everything. I sent a play to a manager, and the only notice he has taken of it has been to write me that he didn’t believe it would draw. Of course it won’t draw, shut up in the manager’s strong box. I never expected it to draw until it was produced. I sent it under the name of Fontaine, as being more aristocratic than Marsac. Fontaine, you know, has graveyards full of noble ancestors, while I, like Napoleon, am the first of my family. Then I sent a picture, called ‘A Rough Sea,’ to the Salon, also under the name of Fontaine.

The Sprightly

One of the judges said the thing made the whole committee ill, — it was so realistic, I presume, — and yet they rejected it.”

Madame Fleury’s eyes softened, and with a glint of a “widow’s smile” upon her handsome mouth, she said gently, after a moment, “Have you — has either one of you — ever thought of — ahem ! — marriage, as a way out of your troubles ? ”

“Often,” answered Marsac, promptly, — “that is, for Fontaine. He was to be the victim, — the Iphigenia, so to speak. As for myself, there are two things I dread, — death and marriage. I must die, but I need not marry. I have sworn I will never be taken alive.”

Madame Fleury blushed, smiled, and murmured, “More men marry than don’t. Most of them marry without a qualm.”

“True,” answered Marsac, gravely ; “and there are men who will pick up

Romance of Marsac

a poisonous snake and dangle it in the air. But I am not one of them. I have no taste for dangling poisonous snakes. I am afraid of them."



"And how stands Monsieur Fontaine on this subject?"

"He is brave to rashness. I believe him fully capable of marrying. In fact, Fontaine seems to have a *pen-*

The Sprightly

chant for Mademoiselle Claire Duval, daughter of Duval the rich old brewer."

"There is a niece — Mademoiselle Delphine Duval — who has just gone to live with them," said Madame Fleury, who liked to show her knowledge of the acquaintances of the two young men.

"I had not heard of that. The truth is, since we pawned our evening clothes we have not seen anything of the Duvals. However, as Fontaine could not marry Claire until he paid his debts, and he could not pay his debts until he married Claire, the matter seems to have settled itself."

Madame Fleury assumed a striking attitude in her chair, and then began to speak, with an insinuating softness in every word and glance and motion : "You have told me much about you and your friend ; now I will tell you something about myself, and it may result in — in — an arrangement mutually advantageous." Her voice sank to

Romance of Marsac

a mere whisper. "As you know, I am a widow."

"Certainly," replied Marsac. "I knew it the very first moment I saw you: you had such a cheerful air."

"I have every reason to look cheerful. The late Monsieur Fleury was nothing but a trouble to me, from the hour I married him until the day the news was brought me that his body had been found in the river."

"Gracious powers!" cried Marsac, in astonishment; "was not the late Monsieur Fleury an angel?"

"No," answered Madame Fleury; "and I don't believe he is an angel now, either."

"Strange, strange!" murmured Marsac. "A departed husband not an angel! This is a phenomenon. Allow me to make a note of it;" and taking out a note-book, he gravely made a memorandum.

"A husband, Monsieur Marsac, is very like a lobster salad. When it is

The Sprightly

good, it is very good, and when it is bad it is intolerable. Monsieur Fleury was very bad. At last he sank so low that he became janitor in a medical school. He was accused one day of stealing some valuable books and instruments, and soon after his body was found in the Seine. It is supposed he committed suicide, knowing himself to be guilty. I did not see the body, and tried to avoid all associations with the affair; but, do what I could, it became known that he had once been my husband. I find the name of a man so unpleasantly notorious very inconvenient to bear, and I should like to change it."

Marsac, after listening intently to this, buried his ears in his hands and appeared to be thinking profoundly for some minutes. "I should think, Madame," he said, after this pause of reflection, "that could be accomplished. The authorities on application will permit you to change your name."

Something like contempt appeared in

Romance of Marsac

Madame Fleury's dark eyes, and she responded coldly, "I should also like the protection which the name of some respectable man would give me."

A pause, longer and more awkward, ensued. It seemed to Marsac as if he actually felt the temperature in the room falling ten degrees every second. For once, language failed him ; and he heard himself saying, in a quavering voice and almost without his own volition, —

"Would that I were a respectable man !"

Madame Fleury turned her dark eyes on him and drew nearer. Her breathing quickened, and a faint pink rose in her smooth cheek, and she said in a laughing voice, which also trembled a little, —

"You are quite respectable enough for me."

Proposals of marriage are always embarrassing, and none the less so when, as the Breton peasants say, "the

The Sprightly

haystack chases the cow.” Marsac felt himself suddenly grow hot, and as suddenly grow cold. He sat quite near Madame Fleury, her half-laughing and brightly burning eyes fixed on him. Every detail of her elegant and correct morning costume, her well-shod feet, her handsome figure, was abnormally present to him. But he found it impossible to raise his eyes to her face. The only clear idea in his mind was a frantic fury towards the women of the present day, who, he foresaw, would make these bad quarters of an hour, such as he was undergoing, common enough to men in the future.

As for Madame Fleury, Marsac’s embarrassment was not lost on her ; and although a new woman, she was still a woman, and womanly pride impelled her to control the slight tremor of her nerves, and say in a voice, studiously cold, “It is a mere matter of business and of convenience with me.”

Romance of Marsac

This gave Marsac, as he thought, a loophole of escape, and he said hurriedly, "I, Madame, in my innocence, have regarded marriage as a matter of sentiment."

Imagine his chagrin, though, when Madame Fleury, smiling and blushing like a girl, replied, "Well, Monsieur Marsac, if you will have it so —"

Marsac saw in a moment the pit he had dug for himself, but he preferred to play the part of a poltroon to stepping into it. He turned and fidgeted in his chair; he looked out of the window, down at the street, hoping to see Fontaine returning, and every moment the situation grew more appalling. Presently he managed to say, —

"Until he is forty, a man is too young to marry; and after he is forty, he is too old."

Madame Fleury surveyed him all over, with a cool contempt which seemed to leave blisters on his body. Then a brilliant idea came to him.

The Sprightly

He glanced at Madame Fleury, and saw as well as felt the rage rising in her heart against him. He tried to speak calmly and naturally, but his words were jerked out of him with stammering and stuttering,—

“You are very, very g-g-good, Madame ; and I feel more pleased—no, no, I mean honoured—than I can explain—express, that is. But you know how Fontaine and I have lived together since our boyhood. We have nobody but each other ; we have shared everything as brothers. Now, d-d-do you think it quite fair that I should, like a pig, accept this dazzling offer without giving Fontaine a chance ?”

It was blunderingly enough spoken, but it served. Marsac saw, in a moment, that Madame Fleury would much rather after that have killed him than married him ; and when she spoke, her cold dignity made him feel like a mouse under an exhausted air-receiver.

Romance of Marsac

“I don’t know but that you are right, after all, and Monsieur Fontaine is really the superior man, and consequently better suited to me.”

The door at that moment flew wide open, and Fontaine rushed in,—his coat a mass of mud and rags, and his trousers slit from the knee to the hip; and he did not have Marsac’s shoes. Without observing Madame Fleury, who sat a little to one side, he burst out,—

“It’s no good, Marsac; the shoemaker said three francs or no shoes.” Then seeing Madame Fleury, he stopped, overwhelmed with embarrassment. Not so the lady, who quietly remarked to Marsac,—

“This accounts for the story of the cabinet dinner, and the gout, and so on;” and she added, with an air of the finest sarcasm, “I see no earthly reason why you, Monsieur Marsac, should not succeed brilliantly in journalism.”

The Sprightly

Marsac was quite disposed to let Fontaine take his part of the situation then, and said not a word; but Fontaine exclaimed, —

“I know what you have come for, Madame Fleury. It is the rent.”

“Then you show very superior intelligence to Monsieur Marsac, as I had the greatest difficulty in making him understand what I came for,” responded Madame Fleury.

“I am awfully sorry,” kept on Fontaine, “but we have n’t a sou except this,” — holding out two francs, — “and I had an accident on the way, and ruined my only coat and trousers, and Marsac has no shoes, and I don’t know what we shall do.” Fontaine stopped, half crying.

“I can suggest something,” said Madame Fleury, showing an amazing calmness. “Not to go over the same ground twice, I have determined to change my name and condition; and —” Here she paused for effect,

Romance of Marsac

and Marsac came unexpectedly to her assistance.

“Fontaine,” said he, solemnly, “I have been a true friend to you. As soon as Madame Fleury mentioned this, I offered her your hand.”

Fontaine looked at Marsac, supposing either he himself or his friend had gone crazy; but Marsac’s cool demeanour proved that he at least was sane. Fontaine, with his mouth open, but dumb with astonishment, gazed first at Marsac and then at Madame Fleury.

“He is speechless with happiness,” cried Marsac. “I knew he would be delighted. You see, marrying runs in Fontaine’s family. His father and mother were married, and his grandparents on both sides were married; and even his great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers were married. Is n’t that so, Fontaine?”

Fontaine, still dazed, mumbled, “I don’t know.”

The Sprightly

“Fie, you bad man!” replied Marsac, laughing. “Pray, Madame Fleury, don’t believe that. I know what I am talking about, and I assure you that all these people in Fontaine’s family were married.”

Madame Fleury then rose majestically. “Gentlemen, this matter must be settled at once. You have your choice, — a marriage, or an eviction within twenty-four hours, and all the arrears of rent paid.”

Fontaine, who was gradually returning to his senses, said, “But, Madame, it is impossible. Marsac has no shoes; I have no clothes —”

“If you do not choose to accept my proposition, Monsieur Fontaine,” coolly interrupted Madame Fleury, “you will be put into the street within twenty-four hours; and when you reach the street, you will be arrested for non-payment of rent.”

“And if I go into the street without any coat or trousers, I shall certainly

Romance of Marsac

be arrested," answered Fontaine, desperately.

Madame Fleury shook her head, as if the whole affair were nothing to her.



Marsac, advancing to Fontaine, whispered in his ear, "Promise her. Promising is n't marrying, you know. You promise her."

"No, *you* do it."

"I can't. She won't have me. You do it. I have known several men who

The Sprightly

have escaped with their lives from widows."

Fontaine, thus urged by Marsac, whom he had never resisted in his life, looked helplessly from his friend to his landlady, and from his landlady back to his friend. After all, promising was not marrying, and it was worth a good deal to get her out of the room.

Madame Fleury brought matters to a crisis by asking, smiling, "Which shall it be, gentlemen, — an engagement or an eviction?"

Fontaine could not bring himself to say the word, but he submitted silently when Marsac, taking his hand, led him to Madame Fleury, and placing their hands together said, with something dangerously near a wink, —

"Take the lovely hand held out to you. Quaff the cup of happiness held to your lips. Madame Fleury, you will exchange for your present name one of the most distinguished names among the great families of France,"

Romance of Marsac

— which was true enough as far as Fontaine's name was concerned.

Madame Fleury, whose principle it was to get through quickly with an awkward business, asked Marsac to sit



V. Verheul

down and write out a little agreement, to be signed by Fontaine and herself. "And it might be as well," she added, "to name the date of the fulfilment of this promise. Let me see, — this is the 20th of February."

The Sprightly

She paused and reflected. Marsac, who had seated himself at the table, reflected too ; and then after a moment he said, —

“ The 31st of April.”

“ There is no 31st of April,” replied Madame Fleury.

“ The first of April would seem appropriate,” kept on Marsac, very gravely.

“ Don’t trouble yourself to be sarcastic, Monsieur Marsac,” replied Madame Fleury, with cutting emphasis. “ It would do admirably if I were marrying you, but otherwise, not.”

“ The twenty-ninth of February, then.”

“ This is not leap year.”

“ Oh, I thought it was.”

Madame Fleury did not condescend to notice this fling ; and Marsac, writing very slowly, proceeded to draw up an informal agreement to marry, between Marie Fleury and Auguste Fontaine.

Fontaine had dropped limp upon a

Romance of Marsac

chair, and sat with his head buried in his arms, the picture of misery. But awkward and humiliating as it was, he had not the smallest doubt that Marsac, whom he thought capable of meeting any emergency, would eventually get him out of the scrape.

When Madame Fleury had signed the paper, Marsac called Fontaine, who remained motionless, without lifting his head.

"That's his way of showing he is pleased," explained Marsac in the most serious manner. "I told you he would be delighted, and I know at this moment he is revelling in rapture; only he has rather a singular manner of showing it."

"He has, indeed," said Madame Fleury; "but I am vain enough to think that it is merely the suddenness of the affair which has somewhat disconcerted him."

Fontaine, almost dragged out of his chair by Marsac, sullenly signed the

The Sprightly

paper ; and after taking possession of it, and recommending him to act in good faith with her, Madame Fleury departed, with the air of a person who has made a successful stroke of business.

As soon as she was gone, Fontaine with a loud groan threw himself on the sofa. Even Marsac began to be somewhat frightened at the turn of affairs. He thought it not unlikely that the prospect of marrying a handsome young man far above her in social position might be really in Madame Fleury's mind. But he would not mention his fears to Fontaine ; and as soon as Madame Fleury was safely out of hearing, Marsac contrived to raise a burst of rather hollow and hysterical laughter.

“To think she should imagine that she could trap us in any such way as that ! Ha ! ha !”

Fontaine's reply, from the depths of the sofa, was something between a groan and a howl, and he moaned,

Romance of Marsac

“You know, Marsac, I love Claire Duval; and this devilish Madame Fleury has my written promise — ”

“A bagatelle!” cried Marsac, still keeping up the pretence of laughter. “Do you suppose I would have let you get into such a trap if I could not have got you out?”

This gave some comfort to Fontaine, who had sublime faith in Marsac’s powers as well as his friendship. But in spite of all his efforts, Marsac pretty soon had to give up the hilarious view of the situation. Fontaine lay on the sofa, groaning, kicking, and occasionally sighing out the name of Claire Duval. Marsac looked out of the window at a prospect made up chiefly of chimney-pots and a fine small rain that began to fall, and for the first time realised their truly desperate situation. After half an hour of silence on his part, and complainings on Fontaine’s, a shadow of his old spirit came back to Marsac.

The Sprightly

“If one of us only had a rich relation we could murder! But I don’t believe any two fellows in the world have so few near relations as we.”

Fontaine by this time was sitting up on the sofa, his head in his hands. Presently he said, with gloomy indifference, —

“I had an uncle, an American, — Uncle Maurice, — who has not been in France for twenty-five years; and the last we heard of him, he was living on fifteen cents a day in New York. Then we heard in a roundabout way that he was dead; but he had nothing to leave anybody.”

“Very likely,” sighed Marsac. “An American and his money are soon parted.”

The next moment, Fontaine believed that the last and greatest of misfortunes had befallen his friend; for Marsac, leaping up, began to charge about the room, shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Your Uncle

Romance of Marsac

Maurice has died, and has left you a fortune! Huzza! What a glorious idea! Huzza for Uncle Maurice!"

Fontaine, stunned at first, went up to Marsac, who was capering wildly about, and in a voice tremulous with apprehension, and himself deadly pale, said, "My dear, kind Marsac, be quiet, pray. You have taken our misfortunes too much to heart, and they have unbalanced you. Sit down awhile; I have some money," — the poor lad had not a sou but the two francs, — "quite enough for several days."

It was piteous to see his weak pretences. He rattled the two francs in his pocket and tried to smile. Marsac, seeing the dreadful thought in Fontaine's mind, stopped his whooping, and seizing Fontaine in his arms, cried out, —

"You honest little simpleton! Of course Uncle Maurice has n't just died and left you a fortune; but let the world think so, and see if our for-

The Sprightly

tunes are not made ! How would a paragraph like this sound in the papers : ‘ We are happy to announce that Monsieur Auguste Fontaine, the brilliant young journalist, has inherited a fortune of ’ — let me see, it ’s as easy to give you two million francs as one million — ‘ from his lately deceased uncle, Monsieur Maurice Fontaine of New York, the celebrated ’ — wine-importer, I should say ; that ’s a good decent business. I can work the paragraph up more ; tell about your Uncle Maurice going against the traditions of his family in entering trade, and all that sort of thing. Trust me to get it up ! ”

Fontaine was so delighted at finding Marsac was not crazy after all, that he could do nothing but hug him and say, “ Marsac, I was so frightened when you began to talk so ; and you may kill all my uncles and aunts, if you can find any to kill. But will — will this dazzling story be believed about Uncle What ’s-his-name ? ”

Romance of Marsac

“My dear fellow,” replied Marsac, in high good-humour, “don’t you know there is a large section of the human race that goes about actually begging to be humbugged? Did you ever know a wildly improbable story started yet that was n’t readily believed? And the more it is contradicted, the more it is believed. At any rate, it can’t do us any harm; nothing can harm us in our present straits.”

“Well, if people should believe in Uncle Maurice,” began Fontaine, anxiously; but Marsac cut him short.

“Believe in Uncle Maurice! Why, I believe in him, and I created him myself, — that is, *our* Uncle Maurice. Dear kind old chap! I feel as if I had just shaken hands with him.”

“But,” persisted Fontaine, “if Madame Fleury should believe in him and the fortune, would n’t it be that much more difficult for me to escape from her?”

“We should be in that much better

The Sprightly

condition to fight her. No, my boy, don't refuse a fortune of two million francs even on paper. Why," continued Marsac, producing from a corner his palette, brushes, and an unfinished portrait of a Spanish bull-fighter, "look ! I will make you a portrait of Uncle Maurice ;"



and with a few bold strokes the bull-fighter assumed the appearance of a hale old gentleman of sixty, in a black coat and a white tie. "But there is no time to lose," cried he, throwing down his palette and

brushes. "It ought to be in the afternoon papers. There is the clock on the church-tower striking eleven,—I shall have time yet before they go to press. Give me your shoes—" Fontaine kicked them off, and Marsac put them on. "And your hat is better

Romance of Marsac

than mine —” Fontaine ran and fetched the hat. “Let me see; the paragraph ought to be written out.” Marsac seated himself at the table, and Fontaine hung over him, while he rapidly wrote half a page, and then, rising and going out, cried: “Keep up your heart, old boy! You are not married yet; you are a long way off from being Monsieur Fleury!”

Left alone, Fontaine remained silent and overwhelmed at the various and startling incidents which had befallen him that morning. “How little one knows,” he thought, “what an hour may bring forth! It is now eleven o’clock: since ten o’clock, I have become engaged to be married; I have found a long-lost uncle; he has died, and left me two million francs.”

A slight sound caused him to raise his head, and he saw a letter pushed under the door. He ran forward and opened it, and then literally fell over

The Sprightly

on his chair with amazement and chagrin. The letter ran, —

MY DEAR NEPHEW AUGUSTE, — The report which reached my family that I was dead was erroneous. I am very much alive, and think of soon revisiting my native land. I have had a hard struggle, and I may not meet with a very flattering reception from my family, of whom you are my only really near relative ; but I feel quite able to take care of myself. I may appear at any moment ; and, until we meet, I am

Your affectionate uncle,

MAURICE FONTAINE.

Fontaine rallied enough to run to the window to call Marsac back. But it was too late. Marsac, with the slip of white paper in his hand, was just turning the corner.



Romance of Marsac

Chapter II

MARSAC returned within three hours, to be confronted by Fontaine with a pale face and Uncle Maurice's letter.

For once, Marsac was staggered. The paragraph was already in print, and the afternoon papers containing it were being cried on the street. He read the letter carefully, then laid it down, saying, "It is impossible that he should return. Living on fifteen cents a day for twenty years must have impaired his constitution to that degree that he cannot stand the voyage."

Fontaine, already in the depths of woe, seemed to sink deeper and deeper. Not so Marsac, whose cheerfulness never left him. All day the two friends sat in their garret, unable on account

The Sprightly

of Fontaine's dilapidated clothes and Marsac's want of shoes to go out and get anything to eat, — for they could still go to a restaurant near the newspaper office and get a dinner on credit. They both shrank from admitting their necessities by asking for an advance from the business office of their newspaper.

Marsac spent the day in patching and cleaning, with awkward industry, Fontaine's torn coat and trousers. Never had Fontaine loved and admired him more. He sang and whistled all day long, made jokes, and pretended that doing without food and fire was rather an amusing experience. At nightfall he held up the torn and soiled coat and trousers for inspection. The poor fellow had done his best, but they were clearly not presentable. Not even then did his courage and spirits desert him. He laughed at his own failure, and said gaily, —

“ Well, my boy, what a tale this will make to tell when we get rich !

Romance of Marsac

For half the pleasure of rich people consists in telling how happy they were when they had not a second shirt to their backs."

At that moment a servant in the establishment opened the door without ceremony, and thrust in a huge box, with the name of "Charlevois, Tailor," on it. Scarcely was the door shut, when the two young men tore open the box. There lay several suits of the handsomest mourning clothes imaginable, with hats and gloves to match; and on top of everything was pinned a letter. It was from Charlevois, one of the best tailors in Paris, saying that he had taken the liberty of sending Monsieur Auguste Fontaine several suits of clothes, asking his inspection of them. He had read in the papers that evening of Monsieur Maurice Fontaine's death, and would



The Sprightly

be glad to supply Monsieur Auguste Fontaine's mourning. Also that his son was in the stationery business, and had enclosed some samples of stationery.

The two young men gazed intently at each other. Then, without a word, Fontaine, with Marsac's help, put on an evening suit, and then a top-coat, with crape-covered hat and black gloves. He certainly looked very handsome in his new outfit. It was almost the first time in his life that he had ever been really well dressed, and the elegantly simple costume brought out his aristocratic beauty. Marsac looked at him with the delight of a mother over a beautiful daughter dressed for her first ball. Fontaine walked up and down, surveying himself with satisfaction in the cracked mirror. He examined his old coat and trousers, — they looked worse than ever by comparison. His silence said eloquently, "I cannot take these gentlemanly habiliments off."

Romance of Marsac

He put the hat on his head. With Marsac, he moved toward the door; they paused.

“This is the Rubicon,” said Marsac.

“The Rubicon is passed,” replied Fontaine, stepping out.

They went to the restaurant where they had credit to dinner, and were seen by twenty persons of their acquaintance. As they approached the desk, on entering, the cashier, a handsome girl, was glancing at an afternoon paper containing the paragraph about Uncle Maurice. She recognised Fontaine, whom she had seen before.

“Do you wish a private room, gentlemen?” she asked.

“Certainly,” answered Marsac, solemnly, who had not thought of it before. “Auguste, you would rather not dine in public to-day?”

Fontaine shook his head, and the two friends in silence, Fontaine with his eyes bent on the mourning hat he carried, went into a private dining-room.

The Sprightly

An obsequious waiter brought a card. Marsac ordered an excellent dinner with champagne.

When it came the sight of it was almost too much for the poor half-starved young fellows. It was the first time they had really dined in weeks. They made an excuse to send the waiter out of the room, when they hugged each other and began to dance wildly, and barely had time before he returned to scuttle back to their chairs and pull long faces while they devoured fish, flesh, and fowl, entrées, *bors-d'œuvres*, and everything else eatable on the table.



Marsac, in the waiter's absence, begged Fontaine to spare the candelabra, while Fontaine caught Marsac in the act of chewing the paper off the *marron glacés*.

Romance of Marsac

“This,” said Marsac, while the waiter was out of the room (for they kept him on the trot), “may be called our first dress rehearsal. We are to appear before the public to-morrow, — you as the heir of your Uncle Maurice, I as the friend of the nephew of his uncle.”

“Do you think we have deceived the waiter?” anxiously asked Fontaine.

“Perfectly. He never saw us order such a dinner before; but I hope he will see us order a good many more like it. Look solemn — he is coming.”

And the waiter coming in found Marsac urging Fontaine to eat, who seemed to be in the depths of despondency. When the time came for feeding the man, Fontaine said sadly, —

“You, Marsac, must pay to-night. I forgot I had changed my clothes.”

“Certainly,” replied Marsac, clapping his hand to his pocket and producing the two francs — the last they had on earth, which he had taken the pre-

The Sprightly

caution to bring with him — and handing them to the waiter. Those two francs made everybody in the restaurant believe the story of Fontaine's fortune.

After the dinner, which lasted for three hours, they went home, and Fontaine wrote a note on the black-edged paper to the editor of their paper, "La Lune," asking for leave of absence for a few days, owing to the loss of a near relative. Marsac took it to the office. His fellow-workers crowded round him, asking questions about the paragraph which had appeared that afternoon. Marsac confirmed it, but declared they had not got any particulars as to the amount of the fortune.

"But I should say it will be under three millions," he added with entire accuracy.

Next day Paris rang with the story. It cannot be denied that both Marsac and Fontaine were a little frightened at the sudden and overpowering success of their little romance. They had not

Romance of Marsac

counted upon the instant and enormous sensation it created. But there was now no retreat for them. Being once committed to Uncle Maurice, they had to abide by their own invention ; and it taxed even Marsac's powers to meet the emergency. Fontaine simply declared that he could not face the world in his new character, and kept close to his lodgings, to avoid interrogatories. Naturally that did still more to set the story on its legs ; and when he began to receive letters of condolence mixed with congratulations, and was forced to reply to them on paper with a black border an inch deep and signed with inky sealing-wax, even he himself began to believe that his Uncle Maurice had died and left him a fortune.

Marsac, who was remarkably clever with his brush, made an excellent picture of Uncle Maurice out of the transformed bull-fighter, and by dint of artistically smoking it, the newness of

The Sprightly

the paint was taken off. He was, however, simply forced to invent a biography of Uncle Maurice, with names, dates, and events. The first time he was asked how Uncle Maurice made his money, he was obliged to say how ; so he represented that it was all made in the wine-importing line.

“ If I had had a moment to think, I should have said mining operations,” he said to Fontaine afterward ; “ but taken unawares, I hit upon the wine-business. And then I had to explain that he went against the traditions of his family by engaging in trade, but was immensely successful, so they forgave him. And then I drew a noble picture of Uncle Maurice, — for, look you, Fontaine, as we have profited by the old gentleman, the least we can do is to give him a good character. I have adorned him with every virtue. If he could come to life, I am sure he would be pleased with the reputation I have given him.”

Romance of Marsac

“But, Marsac, he *is* alive! That is the maddening part. Suppose the real Uncle Maurice should come walking in here some fine day, — what would you say?”

“I should say, ‘Good morning, Monsieur Fontaine; delighted to see you. Have a cigar? We heard that you were dead.’ And the old gentleman would be so pleased at finding himself alive, that he would forgive us anything.”

Among the first persons to hear the story was Madame Fleury; and the hardest task before Marsac was when he was stopped by her in the entresol, one morning, with an inquiry whether the story was true or not about Fontaine’s uncle’s death.

“Alas! it is only too true,” replied Marsac, sorrowfully.

“I think Monsieur Auguste should have informed me of it,” said Madame Fleury, “considering our relations.”

“Ah, Madame, you, a widow, can

The Sprightly

have no idea of the bashfulness of a young man like Fontaine, in his first love affair. The relations of men and women are so changed now. I am barely thirty, but I remember when it was the lady who was diffident. But the last diffident woman, I understand, has been secured for the Jardin des Plantes."

Madame Fleury heard this with a smile playing round her handsome mouth. "I hardly think that the engagement between Monsieur Auguste Fontaine and me can be called a love affair. It was a business arrangement, pure and simple. However, if this story about his Uncle Maurice and his fortune is true, then I shall look forward with more satisfaction than ever to the 15th of May. But why does not Monsieur Fontaine call to see me occasionally?"

"Bashfulness, Madame Fleury,—pure bashfulness. I tell you, men and women have changed places. I pre-

Romance of Marsac

dict that in a few years a young man will no more think of calling on his *fiancée* than a few years back his *fiancée* would have called on him."

Madame Fleury heard this, uttered in Marsac's airiest manner, with the same inscrutable smile. When Marsac left her presence, after an hour's laboured explanations, he had not the slightest certainty whether she believed in Uncle Maurice or not. He rather thought she did not, from her last remark, — which was that if Monsieur Fontaine really had inherited two million francs, she would be glad to have the two hundred he owed her.

However, to have got two hundred francs from Fontaine would have been like getting oysters out of a strawberry bed. As the days went on, he got a great many things, like the mourning clothes and black-edged paper ; and he was pursued by tradesmen desiring him to open accounts with them. But not a franc had he. His absence from the

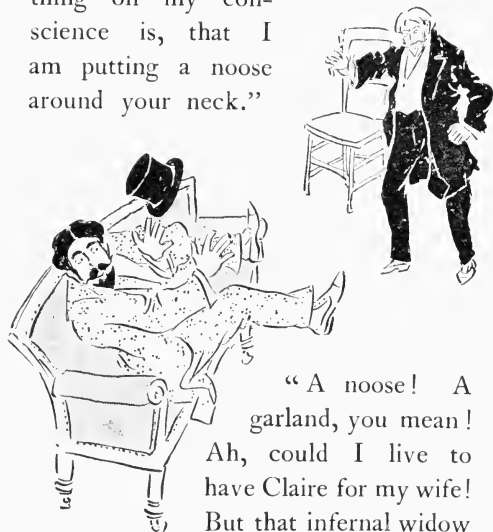
The Sprightly

newspaper office cut off his small salary there ; and while dining at his favourite restaurant every day, smoking the best cigars and enjoying other luxuries, he often had not one sou to rattle against another. Marsac kept up his courage, though, by telling him that something would soon turn up which would enable them to pay their debts, escape from Madame Fleury's house, and live like lords. And when that happy event was accomplished, Marsac promised that Fontaine should be rid of Madame Fleury, and in a position to ask the hand of Claire Duval, whom Fontaine grew every day more passionately in love with, although it had been months since he had seen her. Whenever Fontaine's courage failed, Marsac always held out to him the hope of marrying Claire.

“Just let me catch old Duval, — I don't like to go in search of him,” — cried Marsac, “and I will give him such an account of you that he will

Romance of Marsac

be throwing his daughter at your head. And as she is a sweet girl, and I believe is really in love with you, there will be a marriage, sure. The only thing on my conscience is, that I am putting a noose around your neck."



"A noose! A garland, you mean! Ah, could I live to have Claire for my wife! But that infernal widow downstairs —"

"Don't speak of your *fiancée* in that disrespectful manner," cried Marsac, at the same time dodging Fontaine's new hat, which flew in his direction.

The Sprightly

One night about six weeks after Uncle Maurice's advent, Fontaine was in their garret, waiting for Marsac to return. The room was as shabby as ever, but Fontaine was dressed in the height of the style, although still in the deepest mourning. His bright face, as he walked about whistling jovially, with his hands in his trousers pockets (which were empty, as usual), was in striking contrast to his livery of woe. Fontaine occasionally had spasms of fear concerning their ruse; but at twenty-five, with a good appetite, and enough to satisfy it, with love and hope and a friend like Marsac, one is apt to whistle jovially. In one corner of the room was a table with a delicious supper set out, — sent from the restaurant, which the two young men patronised liberally. On the rickety writing-table lay a letter, bearing the stamp of one of the leading theatres in Paris. In the intervals of walking about, and wondering why Marsac was so late, Fontaine

Romance of Marsac

would read and re-read this letter, with the most evident delight.

At last, just as Fontaine was beginning to be impatient, in walked Marsac, carrying his violin-case in his hand. He opened it without a word, and took out four bottles of champagne. Then in solemn silence he removed his tall hat, which proved to be full of flowers, and these he arranged in the middle of the supper-table.



"What are you up to now?" asked Fontaine, in surprise.

"Ladies to supper," gravely replied Marsac.

Fontaine was astounded. Marsac habitually ran away from respectable women, declaring he was afraid of them; and for those of another kind he had nothing but the pity of a

The Sprightly

refined and honourable soul, which leaves to harder hearts and more evil natures the condemnation of those who sin because they are sinned against. Fontaine uttered only one word, —

“Ladies !”

“Yes,” said Marsac ; “that is, they are ladies to me and to you, — for they are women, half-starved and hard-working. What does

it matter that they are ballet-girls in a third-rate theatre ? Listen. As I was coming home just now, I saw these two poor creatures



standing in front of a pastry shop close by, eyeing the cakes in the window, and without a sou to buy anything with. I overheard them, as they sorrowfully recalled that their last franc had gone in white satin shoes for the ballet next week. I have been hun-

Romance of Marsac

gry myself, and so have you, and I felt for them in my pockets as well as in my heart; but I had no more money than they. I had credit, though, thanks to your admirable Uncle Maurice, and a good supper at home, and I said to them that for once they should be warmed and filled. They are of a grade in society that is not bound by conventionalities, and were quite willing to go anywhere for a good meal. So I told them to slip by the concierge, — they will be here in a few minutes, — and I went and got the wine and the flowers to make it a little more of a feast for the poor souls; and you and I, Fontaine, will be the better, not the worse, for this night's work."

"Marsac, you are the best fellow that ever lived," cried Fontaine, hugging him. Fontaine was always hugging Marsac, and Marsac always responded by a pat on the head, such as a father gives a small boy. "And read this letter," he continued, thrusting the let-

The Sprightly

ter in Marsac's hand. It ran as follows : —

M. AUGUSTE FONTAINE.

MY DEAR SIR, — Happening, some days ago, to read an account of your deserved good fortune, I remember having had some correspondence with you regarding a play, — “A White Marriage.” I chanced to look in my strong box the same day, and there discovered the play itself, where it had lain a whole year, — a fate most unworthy of its great merit, and which could only have occurred by the most astonishing forgetfulness on my part. I make you ten thousand apologies, and assure you the loss is mine ; for since reading the piece, I beg to have the honour of presenting it at the Gaieté Theatre. You have written a play which must command success ; for I cannot understand it, nor can the public, and I presume no more can you. All you have to do, therefore, is to have it presented, and then sit down and wait for the critics to explain the play to you as to the rest of the world. Each one is bound to give a different explanation ; they will get to quarrelling, and your fortune will be made. It is essential, in the drama of to-day, to be complex ; and when you are so complex that nobody, from the author down, knows what the devil a play is about, or what

Romance of Marsac

problems you are proving or disproving, you will be placed upon the same pinnacle with Ibsen, Maaterlinck, and the rest of the Dutch Shakspeares. Ibsen or a skirt dance is what goes nowadays. There is a slight tendency to clearness in your style, which must be remedied if you wish to be a really great modern dramatist. And your play is not really vicious enough : the wife merely gives her husband an opiate while she escapes with her lover, instead of being driven by an imperative fate to give him about a quart of corrosive sublimate. But these are minor faults in a work of great villany, obscurity, and prolixity, which I hope to have the privilege of presenting.

Yours truly,

M. SAVARY,

Manager of the Gaieté Theatre.

Fontaine capered about gleefully, while Marsac read this letter, and then handed him another note which seemed to give him almost equal pleasure. It was from a picture-dealer, and briefly announced that an offer of a thousand francs had been made for "A Rough Sea," and he hesitated about taking it: there was a price marked on the pic-

The Sprightly

ture, — fifty something ; it could n't be fifty francs !

“ But it was fifty francs, all the same,” cried Marsac ; “ and a thousand francs ! Good heavens ! We shall be as rich as the Rothschilds, and we shall be able to get away from these quarters and that dreadful woman downstairs, and I shall marry you to Claire Duval ! ”

Fontaine's reply to this was humming a little song with a refrain, “ Claire, I love thee ! ” which presently made him sigh and look very gloomy. Marsac, who knew what turn his thoughts were taking, said slyly, —

“ I met old Duval to-day.”

Fontaine jumped as if he had been shot. “ And what did he say ? How is Claire ? When are you going to let me out of this infernal confinement, so I can go to see the darling ? ”

“ Fie ! fie ! and you an engaged man,” cried Marsac ; at which Fontaine groaned and tore his hair. “ But,”

Romance of Marsac

continued Marsac, "I have some good news for you. Old Duval has read all the accounts of Uncle Maurice, and has the most childlike faith in him ; and I declare, Auguste, I begin to believe in the old fellow myself. Anyhow, Monsieur Duval talked with me a whole hour this afternoon, and you may depend upon it I stuffed him ; and the result is — now, don't go crazy — that he more than hinted at a match between you and Claire."

Fontaine fell on the sofa in an ecstasy, murmuring, "Dear, darling Claire !"

"And he is coming to see you very soon, to congratulate you. I told him you were going nowhere on account of your recent bereavement ; and, listen to this ! The old fellow wants to oblige you ; and as I mentioned, by way of corroborative testimony, that you were looking round for a country-seat, he said he would sell you a villa he has at Melun for ninety thousand

The Sprightly

francs. Now, I know that Maurepas, our editor-in-chief, is wild for that villa; and I have reason to think he will give a hundred and forty thousand francs for it. Do you see? ”

“ Yes,” said Fontaine. “ I buy it for ninety thousand, and sell it for a hundred and forty thousand. But will it work? ”

“ Not if you jump down old Duval’s throat when he offers it to you.”

“ I sha’n’t be able to prevent it.”

“ Then you will be unworthy of your Uncle Maurice, and I shall be sorry to have provided you with such a relative.”

A sound was heard outside. Marsac listened intently, thinking it to be his two friends of the ballet; but it proved not.

“ I wonder, as much afraid as you are of women,” said Fontaine, “ that you should have had the courage to ask those two poor creatures here even for the pleasure of doing a kind action, — for

Romance of Marsac

nothing gives you so much pleasure as that."

"Pooh!" replied Marsac. "It is not women I fear, it is matrimony; and I show my regard for the sex by remaining a bachelor. I feel that by



not marrying I shall secure one woman, at least, from eternal misery."

Again there was a noise outside the door; and this time it was the two ballet-girls, — Mademoiselle Marie and Mademoiselle Louise, as they introduced themselves. Marsac received

The Sprightly

them with as much kindness and respect as if they had been banker's daughters ; and as for the girls themselves, they were tawdry yet shabby, and extraordinarily painted and be-dizened. But the divinity of womanhood was not extinguished in them, and modesty itself would not have been abashed in the presence of the four assembled in the garret of No. 17 Rue Montignal.

Mademoiselle Marie and Mademoiselle Louise wished to be extremely elegant in the company in which they found themselves ; but it must be admitted that they laughed rather loud, and talked excessively. However, their account of the way in which they slipped past the entresol was very amusing, and the two young men roared with laughter ; and then the fun began. But at the very moment that two corks flew out with a loud report, the door came open with a bang, and Madame Schmid stalked in.

Romance of Marsac

Not Banquo's ghost made a greater sensation at a party than this stout Alsatian. Fontaine, following his usual tactics, ran behind the screen. Ma-



dame Schmid, with one rapid glance at the table and the champagne, uttered but one word, "Thieves!" and made a dash for Fontaine, whom she collared and dragged out.

The Sprightly

“Oh, you pretty boy,” she screamed, “this is your poverty, — champagne and oysters and giving parties, when you can’t pay your wash-bill ! I used to feel sorry for you when you were so poor ; but now I know you are rolling in money, with twenty million francs left you in America, and owing a poor woman two hundred francs for washing, — that is, you and that slick-tongued Marsac yonder !”

Marsac was not “yonder,” but directly behind Madame Schmid, and holding a big tumbler of champagne in one hand, while with the other he deftly seized her round the waist, and began pouring the champagne down her throat. At the same time he was talking her down in vigorous tones, shouting, —

“My dear girl, you really ought n’t to come here. It will ruin our reputations to have a handsome young thing like you found in our apartment.”

Madame Schmid, sputtering, protesting, but obliged to drink the champagne,

Romance of Marsac

willy-nilly, was still able to make a good deal of noise. "Oh, you hypocrite ! you can't honeyfuggle me — " Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, the champagne flowed down her throat.

"Honeyfuggle *you* ? Oh, you bewitching creature, *you* honeyfuggle *me* ! Another glass, Fontaine."

Another tumbler followed the first, Madame Schmid trying to say, "Stop hugging me, you impudent — "

The young ladies enjoyed this excessively ; and before the second glass was wholly disposed of, Madame Schmid was struggling with the emotions produced by the champagne, Marsac's flattery, and wrath at her unpaid bill, but being a thrifty Alsatian, the last was by no means forgotten. Suddenly, amid all the laughing, choking, joking, and commotion, a voice was heard calling at the foot of the stairs, —

"Monsieur Marsac ! Monsieur Fontaine ! open the door and help me up

The Sprightly

these confounded narrow stairs ! I am not built for such Alpine work as this."

"Great heavens ! it is old Duval !" exclaimed Fontaine, who had dropped limp into a chair at the first sound of this voice.

"Go and keep him below for a moment," said Marsac ; and with wonderful quickness he hustled the two girls, nothing loath, into the closet, where they willingly shut the door, tittering at their own predicament. It was something else, though, to get rid of Madame Schmid. Marsac had almost to drag her to the corridor door, she fighting like a tiger, and Marsac assuring her that it would forever destroy them should a young and handsome woman like her be found in their apartment. Barely was she shoved out, and scarcely had Marsac time to seat himself in a meditative attitude with a book, when Fontaine, with old Duval, entered ; and while greeting him, Mar-

Romance of Marsac

sac could hear Madame Schmid prancing up and down the corridor in her wrath.

Monsieur Duval, broad, rubicund, benevolent, conceited, and with the true auriferous air which belongs to the vulgar rich, congratulated Fontaine on his accession of fortune. Fontaine received this modestly, while Marsac eulogised Uncle Maurice and pointed out the goodness indicated in every feature of the portrait hanging on the wall.

“Yes, yes,” said Monsieur Duval, “you have had a great stroke of luck, young man; and I hope you will be worthy of it.”

To which Fontaine replied that he hoped to prove himself entirely worthy of his Uncle Maurice’s goodness.

“And now,” cried Monsieur Duval, swelling out his waistcoat, “I must tell you that I have other objects in calling to see you to-night, besides congratulating you on your good for-

The Sprightly

tune. One is, to sell you a piece of property at Melun; and the other is to ask you both to dine with me at my Passy villa very soon. I wish you to meet my niece Delphine, who has lately come to live with my daughter and me. Would to-morrow suit?"

"Perfectly," cried Fontaine, eagerly, but was checked by Marsac with a look.

"I think you have the poorest memory I ever saw," said Marsac, severely, to Fontaine. "Have you forgotten that to-morrow we dine with the Prince, and next day with the Marshal, the day after with the Archbishop?"

Duval, a little staggered by these magnificent names, remarked, "I thought you told me to-day that Monsieur Fontaine was not going into society on account of his mourning?"

"So he is not," coolly responded Marsac. "These are merely little family affairs with people we have always known."

Romance of Marsac

This did not make old Duval any the less anxious to have them, and he named a day the next week, which Marsac and Fontaine, after an elaborate consultation of their notebooks, finally found they could accept.

“And now about the villa,” said the old brewer, standing with his feet wide apart and his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. “It’s a very pretty place at Melun; my daughter is very fond of it; and if you are looking for a country place, Monsieur Fontaine, you could not do better than take it, at ninety thousand francs.”

Fontaine, remembering Marsac’s injunction not to be too eager, hummed and ha’d a little for effect. He was deeply indebted to Monsieur Duval for his offer; ninety thousand was a



The Sprightly

mere bagatelle, etc. Old Duval persisted, and his motive was ridiculously clear; every other word was, "My daughter is fond of the Melun place," — "My daughter could scarcely be persuaded to leave it even for our finer house at Passy."

Marsac urged the apparently unwilling Fontaine to accept the offer, mentioning several countesses, duchesses, and princesses of their acquaintance who thought about buying places at Melun. At every mention of a title, the old brewer rose to the bait, and was a perfectly happy man when Fontaine agreed to take the place at ninety thousand, and expressed his gratitude to Monsieur Duval for favouring him with the purchase.

The old man then got on the subject of his daughter, varied with digressions on his niece Delphine, which seemed to amuse him very much. "A fine, handsome girl she is, but the 'new woman' with a vengeance.

Romance of Marsac

Believes in a woman's having a mission, and all that, and is as deadly opposed to matrimony as our friend Marsac," — at which Monsieur Duval cackled and chuckled with great enjoyment for some time. "By the way," he continued, "I expect her and my daughter to call for me on their way from a dinner, and they will be here before long. Monsieur Fontaine, will you oblige me by telling the porter to direct them to wait awhile in case I should not be quite ready to go?"

Monsieur Duval had an object in getting Fontaine out of the way, for the moment the door closed upon him, he drew his chair up to Marsac's, and began very seriously, and mopping his forehead in his anxiety: "You know, Monsieur Marsac, I have always thought extremely well of Monsieur Fontaine; and now that he has come into a snug fortune, I should not mind if he — if my daughter —" Here

The Sprightly

Monsieur Duval winked, and Marsac grinned appreciatively.

"I understand perfectly," answered Marsac.

"About ten millions, I hear," remarked Monsieur Duval, in a whisper.

"Oh, no, no!" replied Marsac, deprecatingly. "That is a gross exaggeration. I give you my word, Monsieur Duval, it is nothing like that. I know more about the matter than anybody except Fontaine, and I assure you that it is but two millions."

"And how do you think Monsieur Fontaine feels toward my daughter?"

Marsac knitted his brows thoughtfully. "I really don't know," he said at last; "I have never heard Fontaine mention Mademoiselle Claire except in general terms; but I know she is a very charming girl, and any man might be glad and proud to have her. But, Monsieur Duval," said Marsac, confidentially, "you have no idea how the poor fellow has been persecuted with

Romance of Marsac

propositions of the sort since his Uncle Maurice's death. At the club the dukes and marquises are sometimes four deep around him, all with an eye on having him for a son-in-law ; and as for the widows, the poor fellow has had to insure his life against their eating him up."

This whetted old Duval's desire considerably. Marsac, seeing this, kept on.

"Now, here is a letter from the Prince de Landais," taking up Landais's bill, — "I assure you, neither of us knows the man except in a business way — and here he writes, not only wanting Fontaine to marry his daughter, but actually asking for money in advance, — about six hundred and seventy-five francs, — and he takes the tone of a person already entitled to it !"

"A wretched, aristocratic pauper !" cried old Duval, indignantly. "At least, the man who marries my Claire will not have a worthless father-in-law,

The Sprightly

like this Prince de Landais, to prey upon him ! ”

“ And here is a letter from Madame Schmid, or rather the Baroness Schmid,” — Marsac made this addition, seeing how quickly Monsieur Duval had jumped at every title he had named. “ She is very particular about her title, because she has just got one. This woman is a great swell, but a rude, coarse creature, old enough to be Fontaine’s mother, and was once a washerwoman, I am told. By the way,” — here Marsac put his mouth to old Duval’s ear, — “ she comes to this apartment in pursuit of him ! He keeps out of her way, refuses to answer her letters, and then she pursues him here ! She was in this room when you were announced below, and it was with the greatest difficulty we got her out. She is in the corridor still, I believe.”

Marsac rose, and taking the old brewer by the hand, they tipped to

Romance of Marsac

the corridor door. Monsieur Duval knelt down, and through the keyhole saw Madame Schmid rampaging up and down the corridor like a caged lioness.

“Great heavens!” whispered old Duval, “no one can blame Monsieur Fontaine from running away from such a woman!”

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when, Madame Schmid making a lunge at the door, it flew open, knocking Monsieur Duval sprawling. Madame Schmid dashed in, walking over the prostrate Monsieur Duval as if he had been a frog, and began to harangue Marsac violently, swinging her arms about like a Dutch windmill.

“Oh, you deceiver! I know it is n’t worth while to do anything with Mon-



The Sprightly

sieur Fontaine, — you have him under your thumb ; but I will bring you both to terms, that I promise you. And where has Monsieur Fontaine gone ? You have spirited him out of the way, — I know it ; you do it every time I come ! ”

Marsac’s only reply was to catch her round the waist, and say soothingly, as he dragged her back to the door, “ My dear girl, you will certainly ruin Fontaine’s reputation if you act in this manner.”

“ I don’t care a fig for my reputation,” bawled Madame Schmid, — “ it is money I am after ; and money I mean to have, out of Monsieur Fontaine ! ”

Marsac managed to get her outside the door, which he took the precaution to lock behind her, and said as he stepped back into the room, “ That ’s a sample of what poor Fontaine has had to put up with since he came into his money. And there is another one — a widow — who is worse than all.”

Romance of Marsac

“Oh, Jupiter!” was Monsieur Duval’s exclamation, as he picked himself up off the floor, and dusted his knees and elbows.

“A very handsome woman, a comtesse, — the Comtesse de Fleury. She got a written promise out of Fontaine, in a moment of weakness — you understand?”

“Yes — a widow and a moment of weakness! I understand,” said the old brewer, feelingly.

“It is n’t of the slightest legal value, though, as I can testify that it was obtained under duress; and Fontaine would give half he is worth to get rid of her.”

As Marsac said this about the written agreement, he could not help wishing, with all his heart, that he had it that moment in his possession.

Monsieur Duval reflected seriously for some minutes before speaking. “I acknowledge to you,” he said, “that I regard a widow in an affair of this sort

The Sprightly

as a person to be reckoned with ; and it is I who tell you so, and I have a head on my shoulders. Now, I hear you have great influence with Monsieur Fontaine — ”

“ Not a particle,” Marsac protested vigorously.

“ Nonsense ! You are trying to fool me ! But I will say this to you. Taking into account my daughter’s fancy for your friend Fontaine, and his good character and his good birth and his fortune, if you can bring about an — arrangement — you understand — it will be for the happiness of the young people.”

“ I would do anything for Fontaine’s happiness,” said Marsac.

“ Then, could n’t you — ahem — the widow — Now, you are yourself a very attractive fellow. Perhaps the widow might make an exchange ? ”

“ Take me, do you mean ? My dear sir, I would do anything on earth for Fontaine but one ; and that is, to get married.”

Romance of Marsac

“Ha! ha! That’s the way Delphine talks.”

“I have n’t the remotest idea how to make an offer. It would be like a horse trying to play the fiddle.”

“Oh, well, you need not mind about that, with a widow. She will do the business for you.”

“She shall not have a chance, if I can help it — that is,” stammered Marsac, as he recollected that Madame Fleury had already proposed to him. “To be very confidential, this particular widow has — er — before entangling Fontaine — in an interview with me — ” Marsac stopped, blushing; and Monsieur Duval, closing one eye, playfully poked him in the ribs.



“My dear young friend,” said he, with an air of superior wisdom, “she did not want you very much, else she would have had

The Sprightly

you. Even I have had to use all my astuteness to keep from being gobbled up by widows. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty where widows are concerned. But if you won't listen to my proposition in that respect, I am sure you will to one upon another subject. I intend, next month, reorganising my breweries into a stock company, and I have positive assurances that the shares will command a premium. If you and your friend Fontaine can raise ten thousand francs within the next week, I can let you in on the ground floor; and within three weeks you will make fifty thousand francs each."

"You shall have my cheque to-morrow morning," promptly answered Marsac, who had not a sou to his credit or in hand.

Old Duval then began to examine the room. The supper-table seemed to strike him favourably, but the room did not. "It seems to me," he said,

Romance of Marsac

“that — ahem — your friend might have better quarters. This is pretty high up.”

“Yes,” answered Marsac, “but we remain here on account of the widow, the Comtesse de Fleury ; and our surroundings are more valuable than you think, perhaps. We have been collectors in our time, I assure you. Do you see that sofa ? ”

“Yes,” said Monsieur Duval, punching the poor old sofa ; “but it’s moth-eaten. It ought to be mended here.”

“It would be sacrilege to touch that sofa. It belonged to Peter the Great. He made that hole in it. I forget exactly what we paid for it, but it is insured for forty thousand francs.”

Monsieur Duval’s mouth came wide open with surprise.

“And this mirror,” kept on Marsac, pursuing his advantage. “It is cracked — but by whom ? By Madame Pompadour. One day, the King was very disobliging to her, and she flew into a

The Sprightly

passion. She picked up a — ” Here Marsac halted, but his eye travelling round the room fell on their rusty bellows; he resumed glibly: “She picked up a pair of bellows, and threw them at the King. His Majesty dodged, and smash went the bellows against the mirror, — and here are the veritable bellows. The mirror and bellows are worth, together, about twenty-five thousand francs.”

Old Duval examined them with the highest respect. “I see,” said he, “they are immensely valuable.”

“And do you see this violin?” Marsac handed the old brewer the violin.

“Ah!” cried Monsieur Duval, delighted to show he knew something about violins, “a Stradivarius, perhaps?”

“My dear sir,” said Marsac, in a tone of pity, “that violin was old when Stradivarius was young. It is the identical instrument that Nero fiddled on when Rome was burning!”

Romance of Marsac

This reduced Monsieur Duval to an amazed silence, during which they heard laughter and voices on the stairs, and the door opened, admitting Fontaine and two remarkably pretty girls.

“Dear papa !” cried one of them, “just as we got to the door the wheel came off the carriage, and the coachman had to go to a stable after another carriage — and Monsieur Fontaine brought us up here.”



“Quite right,” replied Monsieur Duval, looking fondly at his daughter. “You know Monsieur Marsac ; but I must present him to *you*, Delphine. Oh, you two should get on famously, — you are both such haters of marriage !”

The instant Marsac’s eyes lighted on Delphine, he felt a singular sensation. She was slight and tall, with a patrician beauty of face and figure, and an air of self-possession second only

The Sprightly

to Madame Fleury's. Delphine, too, felt an instant attraction toward Marsac, with his bright eyes, his alert look of intelligence, and his gentlemanly figure. This perception of Marsac's charm caused her to say lightly, yet with a faint blush, —

“I am not exactly a hater of marriage. I only regard it as a primitive and somewhat unintelligent arrangement.”

The effect of these few words from the lips of a woman he had seen but sixty seconds, produced a strange effect on Marsac. He felt a slight chill of disappointment; but he answered in his old strain, “Just what I have often longed to say, Mademoiselle, but never had the courage.”

“But I have,” remarked Delphine, showing her beautiful teeth in a smile. “Women, you know, have much more real courage than men. Especially is this true in times of great calamity.”

Romance of Marsac

"Yes, indeed," said Marsac, with energy. "I have often noticed, at the wedding ceremony, the bride is always much more composed than the groom."

Being launched into the discussion, Delphine's next blow at the masculine sex was this: "One phase of the question has frequently occurred to me. Does the higher education unfit men for marriage?"

Marsac shook his head, unable to find an answer to this proposition, which he frankly acknowledged had never before presented itself to him.

Fontaine and Claire had listened to this in silence, but the furtive looks exchanged between them showed a silent protest against it, and also a very deep interest in each other. Old Duval laughed at the discussion between Marsac and Delphine, and then they gathered round the table to have a glass of champagne while waiting for the carriage. Both the young men urged Monsieur Duval and the young

The Sprightly

ladies to partake of what Marsac called their frugal supper, and Monsieur Duval chuckled at the idea of such frugality, while declining it.



The young people talked gaily together while sipping champagne, and blessed the coachman for taking so long to bring another carriage. Marsac and Delphine seemed to find it impossible to get away from the question of marriage, albeit they tried to

Romance of Marsac

outdo each other in railing at it. Delphine declared that a woman should keep her eyes open at the moment of marrying even the best of men, and Marsac recommended that she should keep her eyes half shut ever afterward. Claire charmed Fontaine by saying sweetly, after this, —

“I should scorn to watch the man I married. I should want to have every confidence in him.”

“Then, Mademoiselle, you would need to kill him immediately after the ceremony,” counselled Marsac.

Then the conversation turned on Uncle Maurice. Marsac and Fontaine had a number of ready-made anecdotes respecting the old man and his honourable career in New York, which they told with gravity and effect. Marsac declared that he felt like going in mourning himself, so grateful was he for what Uncle Maurice had done for Fontaine; while Fontaine, with perfect truth, said that he thought more of his

The Sprightly

Uncle Maurice than of any relative he had in the world. Every moment passed in one another's society drew these four young hearts closer together, — Fontaine and Claire willingly, and Marsac and Delphine loudly protesting and abusing the emotions which, just born in their hearts, yet grew like Jonah's gourd.

At last, however, this accidental half-hour — which brought so much happiness to Fontaine and Claire, and turned the world topsy-turvy for Marsac and Delphine — came to an end. The carriage was reported, the Duval party rose to go, after the two young men had reiterated their promise to dine on the Saturday at Passy, old Duval saying, —

“Of course, it is most kind of you to come to us, with all your engagements with marshals and dukes and princes ; but,” with a significant look at Marsac, “some of those titled people you want to keep at long range.”

Romance of Marsac

“Especially the Prince de Landais and the Baroness Schmid,” boldly responded Marsac.

The door was open, and the Duvals were going out after saying good-bye for the tenth time, when the two young men saw coming up the stairs the compact figure and shrewd face of Maurepas, their editor-in-chief. He met old Duval face to face on the landing.

“Delighted to see you, Monsieur Duval,” cried Maurepas. “I was going to see you to-morrow; but if you will pardon a busy man for introducing business, just let me ask you to give me the refusal of that villa you have at Melun until I can get to see you.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it is the day after the ball. I have just in effect sold it to Monsieur Fontaine,” replied Monsieur Duval, going on downstairs.

Maurepas entered the room with the air of a chagrined man, and throwing down his hat, said crossly, —

The Sprightly

“So, Fontaine, that newspaper story is true, and you have come into a great fortune ? ”

“Not so very great,” answered Fontaine, modestly, — “only a couple of million francs.”

“Oh, Lord ! ” sniffed Maurepas, “how our ideas have expanded ! Well, I am glad your old uncle cut up so handsomely.”

“Monsieur Maurepas,” said Marsac, severely, “I beg you will at least respect Fontaine’s mourning attire. It is exceedingly painful to us to have Monsieur Maurice Fontaine’s death alluded to in that flippant and heartless manner.”

Monsieur Maurepas sniffed louder than ever, but did not pursue the objectionable subject. “Well,” he said, “I suppose Fontaine will give up journalism now ? ”

“I don’t know,” responded Fontaine, dubiously ; “I always liked my profession.”

Romance of Marsac

“In that case,” replied Maurepas, “I will make you an offer. I know what you can do.”

Fontaine could not forbear remarking, “You used to say I could n’t do anything !”

“My dear fellow,” answered Maurepas, coolly, “that was before you were talked about. Now, as the most talked-about young man in Paris, your name is worth something to a newspaper, even if your ideas are not. I will make you this proposition. If you will give ‘La Lune’ three signed articles a week, of a thousand words each, I will give you five hundred francs a week. I make but one stipulation, — your name must be signed to them, but Marsac must write them.”

Fontaine hesitated for a moment, but Marsac answered for him : “Done !”

“And another thing. There is to be a great journalists’ dinner given on the 17th, and I want you, when called upon, to make a speech in the name

The Sprightly

of the younger members of the staff of
‘La Lune.’”

“I could n’t! I would n’t! I never made a speech in my life.”

“But you could. What’s the matter with Marsac composing the speech, and your delivering it?”

“None in the world,” answered Marsac, laughing. “So you can put him down for the 17th.”

“And now about the Melun villa,” continued Maurepas, after making a memorandum in his note-book. “I dare not go home to my wife without the promise of that place. I told her I would see Monsieur Duval to-day, but I forgot it. I don’t know what you paid for it, but I will give you a hundred thousand francs for it.”

The prospect of making a clear ten thousand francs delighted Fontaine so that he could not speak for a moment, — when, catching Marsac’s eye fixed upon him, he understood the signal, and gave an evasive answer, which

Romance of Marsac

Maurepas pooh-poohed. Marsac then interfered.

"The fact is," he said, with his most candid manner, "I am against you there, Monsieur Maurepas. I want Fontaine to keep the villa. He wants to buy a great hotel on the Avenue de l'Alma for seven hundred and fifty thousand francs. I tell him it is much too expensive for him, and I don't think his Uncle Maurice would have approved of it."

Fontaine had never heard of the Avenue de l'Alma house, but he assented promptly. Maurepas, however, being intensely anxious for the villa, cut short the discussion about the Avenue de l'Alma house by offering one hundred and ten thousand francs for the villa. Fontaine, dying to accept, glanced at Marsac, who began to whistle softly. Maurepas, growing more eager, jumped his bid immediately to one hundred and twenty thousand francs. Fontaine thought Marsac crazy,

The Sprightly

when he rose, buttoned his coat, and said, —

“Pray excuse us, Monsieur Maurepas. We have an engagement at a little supper to-night at the Archbishop’s, — quite an informal little affair.”

“A hundred and thirty thousand francs!” cried Maurepas. “I am a great fool; but —”

Marsac handed Fontaine’s crape-covered hat to him.

“A hundred and forty thousand for the villa, and may the devil take it!” said Maurepas, in desperation.

“No!” joyfully shouted Fontaine, who saw acquiescence in Marsac’s eye. “I’ll take it!”

“Make one condition, my dear fellow,” said Marsac, earnestly, to Fontaine. “If you will be such a fool as to sell the villa, make Monsieur Maure-



Romance of Marsac

pas promise you not to mention the price to Monsieur Duval. The old gentleman thought he was selling it to you for a mere song, and he will never forgive you if he finds out you re-sold it immediately at so small an advance."

"Yes, yes," said Fontaine; and Maurepas, who was making out a little memorandum of the transaction, added readily, —

"Yes, yes. I will not mention it."

"Stop," cried Marsac. "It would be as well to tell Monsieur Duval that Fontaine got a large advance on it. That will reconcile old Duval to his selling it."

"I'll tell the old fellow anything you like. Only sign this little memorandum, Fontaine, and you can pass the papers over directly to me as soon as you get them. And if you will take a cheque to bind the bargain —"

Fontaine could scarcely refrain from embracing the editor on the spot, but

The Sprightly

obeying a telegraphic signal from Marsac, he merely said, "If it is any inconvenience to you —"

"It is not the slightest; and it will please my wife to know it is settled," answered Maurepas, taking out a cheque-book and rapidly writing a cheque for twenty thousand francs.

In ten minutes the informal but binding agreement was made and signed, and Maurepas took his departure.

Fontaine and Marsac, left alone, sat looking intently at each other, simply stunned by their good fortune. Marsac, finding

words unable to express his rapture, turned a double handspring over the sofa, when Fontaine, rushing up to him, hugged and kissed him violently. After this, they stood grasping each other for five minutes in silent rapture, when Marsac's countenance, losing



Romance of Marsac

its blissful expression, became suddenly grave.

“Fontaine, this is glorious ; but tell me one thing. What is that singular sensation which I felt the instant my eyes rested on Delphine ? I feel it now. It is most peculiar and penetrating, and, although agitating, not unpleasant.”

“Love, you idiot !”

“You alarm me,” said Marsac, anxiously. “Tell me it is something less dangerous, — locomotor ataxia or paresis : I have been told the symptoms are somewhat alike.”

“I tell you that you are in love with Delphine, just as I am in love with my sweet Claire ; and you need not fight and struggle against it. Love is lord of all. No man has lived until he has loved.”

“But is there no way out of love ? A course of Plato and a low diet — ”

“Not a particle of good !”

The Sprightly

Marsac relapsed into gloom, until Fontaine, whacking him on the back, cried exultingly, —

“Think, Marsac, twenty thousand francs in hand ; thirty thousand more coming ; forty thousand francs profit each from the brewery shares we can now buy ; a thousand francs for a picture ; a play placed ; clothes enough for two years, — hurrah for Uncle Maurice ! ”

“Hurrah ! hurrah ! hurrah ! for Uncle Maurice ! ” shouted Marsac, capering wildly about.

Fontaine ran and opened the closet door to let out the two ballet-girls, who had gone to sleep. He pulled them out, and began dancing gaily with them ; while Marsac, finding Madame Schmid at the keyhole listening, dragged her in out of the corridor, and seizing her round the waist, began to waltz furiously, both of them hurrahing for Uncle Maurice at the top of their lungs, and singing doggerel verses made

Romance of Marsac

up as they danced, and all ending with
a joyous refrain of, —

“Houp-là! for Uncle Maurice!”



The Sprightly

Chapter III

THE dinner at Passy resulted in several things. Fontaine and Claire could no longer conceal their infatuation with each other, and a tacit engagement ensued, to be announced as soon as Fontaine could free himself wholly from Madame Fleury, — which meant, as soon as she gave up the pursuit of him.

The two friends had escaped from under the roof of 17 Rue Montignal by the exercise of an ingenuity akin to that which enables men to dig under castle walls, to steal past sentries, and to find their way over prison gates. They secretly hired another lodging, and, to avoid suspicion, made no move toward paying their rent to Madame Fleury, in spite of their coming into

Romance of Marsac

ready money. This apparent absence of cash led her to believe, more than ever, that the story of the rich uncle was an invention of Marsac's. They had little to move, except their new clothes and Uncle Maurice's portrait. For a week before their flight, every day they came downstairs whistling, and wearing two and sometimes three suits of clothes, which they shed, as a snake sheds his skin, at their new lodgings. At last, in the dead of night, they crept softly out of their apartment, leaving



on the table a note addressed to Madame Fleury, enclosing the full amount of their indebtedness; and stealing downstairs, — Marsac with his violin case, and Fontaine with Uncle Maurice's portrait, — they gained the street,

The Sprightly

where they ran as if Satan were after them.

Madame Fleury's chagrin next morning was excessive, particularly when she read the note, in which Marsac thanked her ironically for her hospitality to them. She had not the smallest clue to their whereabouts, but she went to work quietly to find them out. Meanwhile, Marsac and Fontaine, having her out of sight, were not disposed to trouble themselves further about her; but old Duval naturally wished his daughter to avoid any scandal which might arise over the affair, and was very solicitous that Madame Fleury be settled with. "Let sleeping dogs lie," was Marsac's motto; and he was not inclined to hunt up Madame Fleury in order to get a formal release from her.

Meanwhile, the catastrophe indicated at the very first meeting between Marsac and Delphine had fallen out in the most violent manner. They fell mutually in love, with a precipitance

Romance of Marsac

to which even Claire and Fontaine's ardour was not a patch. But although there was disaffection in the citadel of both their hearts, pride and policy made a brave show of defence when really each only waited the demand from the other to surrender. Marsac dared not propose to Delphine that to secure himself the charm of her society he enslave her in marriage. To ward off the suspicions which might arise in her mind from the sly jokes and hints of the two confessed lovers, he gibed at marriage more keenly than ever. Delphine, who was not a whit behind Marsac in falling in love, scorned to be outdone, and railed at love and marriage, quoted Plato and Nordau, and made herself miserable in a manner truly feminine.

Old Duval was bent on the match between his daughter and Fontaine, — the more so, as Marsac informed him confidentially that Fontaine had two more uncles in America, and an aged and infirm aunt, all of whom intended

The Sprightly

to make him their heir, and each of whom was over eighty years of age.

The two young men were much at Passy, and the invitations elsewhere which they had once been forced to invent now really existed. The whole face of existence, indeed, was changed for them, — for Marsac as for Fontaine. Fontaine had always thought Marsac the cleverest fellow in the world, and he now ranked him with Napoleon and Alexander the Great. The play had been produced, and was immensely successful; the picture had been exhibited, and highly praised; while at the journalists' dinner, Marsac's speech delivered by Fontaine had marked Fontaine forever as a born after-dinner speaker and a man of *esprit*. This last reputation was amply confirmed by the brilliant articles, signed by Fontaine and written by Marsac, which sparkled three times a week upon the pages of "La Lune." In short, it appeared as if the mere report of a

Romance of Marsac

fortune of two million francs was enough to produce two million francs. But the real fact was that Marsac, hitherto an unappreciated genius, had risen to the great occasion offered him, and his success was not that of a charlatan. It was that of a man of parts, accomplishments, and that large generosity which does a good thing and troubles not that the world gives the credit to some one else. And as everybody believed in the defunct Uncle Maurice, Fontaine and Marsac actually seemed to be deceived by their own illusion, and would talk quite gravely between themselves of Uncle Maurice, — his tastes, his habits, and his appearance. As for the real Uncle Maurice, nothing more had been heard of him, and the two young men easily persuaded themselves that nothing would. In any event, they did not intend to cross the bridge until they came to it; and some of the advantages gained by the fictitious uncle were

The Sprightly

of so solid a nature that even if Uncle Maurice turned up, he could not rob them of the entire fruits of their scheme.

One bright evening early in May, they had dined at Passy, and after dinner sat, with the two girls and old Duval, on the terrace. The evening was warm for the season, and coffee was served out of doors. After a while Delphine, who carried a volume of Plato about with her as her oriflamme of battle, asked Marsac to read something to them from the great philosopher. This Marsac promptly agreed to, if Delphine would hold a candle, — which would be necessary in the fading light. As it brought Delphine's golden head quite close to Marsac's closely cropped brown one, she consented willingly. Old Duval, who had but a poor opinion of Plato, sauntered off to the other end of the terrace, close by the hedge which overlooked the high-road. A table with coffee,

Romance of Marsac

iced champagne, and cigars mitigated his solitude. Afar off in the dark illuminated by the wax candle which looked like a firefly, Marsac read Plato aloud,



with assent on his lips and contradiction in his heart. Fontaine and Claire, exchanging laughing glances, varied by an occasional tender pressure of the hands, half listened; while Delphine, happy to be near Marsac, and smiling

The Sprightly

at him, yet cherished bitterness against him in her heart for his professed disdain of love.

Presently Monsieur Duval was heard calling, "Monsieur Marsac!" Marsac, to whom Plato had become well-nigh intolerable, laid the book down with a vicious slam, and walked to the other end of the terrace, where they were almost out of sight and hearing.

"Come," said the old man, good-humouredly, "have n't you had enough of that old fool Plato?"

"My dear Monsieur Duval, you horrify me, you pain me!" responded Marsac, in a shocked voice. "Plato — the divine Plato — may go to the devil," was his inward conclusion.

"Well, well," continued Monsieur Duval, "we won't say anything more on the subject, since you and Delphine are so touchy about it. Take a glass of champagne, — you like it?"

"I am not afraid of it," said Marsac, pouring out a glass.

Romance of Marsac

Monsieur Duval sighed, fidgeted, and then burst out with, "Do you know, I am afraid — I am afraid I have been to blame in letting my daughter and Monsieur Fontaine see so much of each other, while matters are still so uncertain about the Comtesse de Fleury ; for I see the two young people are deeply in love with each other. Now," he continued, with a smile, "there is no such danger for you and Delphine, for I believe you talk about nothing except the folly of loving and being loved."

"True," responded Marsac, gloomily, and trying to drown in champagne the resentment he felt at the scurvy trick which fate had played him.

"Monsieur Fontaine is a very gifted young fellow," said Monsieur Duval.

"He is," replied Marsac, with enthusiasm.

"That picture he painted —"

"Admirable !"

"I have no objections to a man's

The Sprightly

knowing something about art, if he can sell his pictures," said Monsieur Duval, with cautious praise. "There was — ahem — Michael Angelo, for example —"

"Michael Angelo was a devil of a fellow with a brush and a paint-pot ; but the man who painted Fontaine's picture was n't far behind him."

"And that play ?"

"Literally, a screaming success. The women are carried out in hysterics at every performance. One of them, we hoped, would die from excitement. It would have been worth five thousand francs' advertising. But, unfortunately, she recovered just when our prospects seemed brightest."

"And the speech at the journalists' dinner —"

"The greatest effort of my — I mean, of Fontaine's life."

"Those signed articles are making a sensation."

"Ah, yes ; many a night have I sat

Romance of Marsac

up writing — that is, reading those articles. Depend upon it, the things that go under Fontaine's name are very remarkable."

At that moment a footman approached, and handed Marsac a card, saying, "The lady asked for Monsieur Fontaine."

Marsac was about to hand the card back, when he happened to see on it "Madame Fleury."

"Stop!" he cried instantly; "give me a moment to think. Monsieur Duval, here is the Comtesse de Fleury come after Fontaine! She must not see him!"

Monsieur Duval jumped up, flurried, and anxious to be out of the way at the coming scene. "Good heavens! Let me get away. I must keep my poor child out of sight. And Fontaine —" Monsieur Duval waddled off, making remarkably good time for a gentleman of his years, but returned to say impressively, "Take care she

The Sprightly

doesn't bamboozle you. You need two pairs of eyes to watch, and four legs to run away, where a widow is concerned ; " and then he disappeared.

" Show the lady here," said Marsac, with assumed calmness, and at the same time taking another glass of champagne to steady his nerves.

In a minute or two he saw Madame Fleury's imposing figure advancing along the gravelled walk, and then she had mounted the terrace steps and was gliding over the velvet turf toward him. As usual, she was perfectly well dressed. Her bonnet was set on her head with the grace of a coronet. In one hand she carried a parasol, and in the other a silver card-case. Marsac advanced politely to meet her, and the two exchanged bows, as pugilists shake hands on entering the ring.

Madame Fleury lost no time in proceeding to business. " Monsieur Marsac, I have been at a great deal of trouble to find you ; but, as you see,

Romance of Marsac

I have succeeded. I wish to see Monsieur Fontaine in regard to the engagement between us."

"Is there an engagement between you?" asked Marsac, innocently. "Of what nature, may I ask?"

Madame Fleury smiled scornfully at Marsac's pretended ignorance. "If it be true that he has come into a fortune, then I am the more determined that our contract shall be fulfilled on the 15th of this month. I acknowledge, though, that I have not yet been able to persuade myself fully of this old uncle's death, or even of his previous existence, because *you* have had too much to do with the affair."

"This, indeed, is humiliating," said Marsac, with an offended air. "But, Madame, uncle or no uncle, let me beg of you to give up this pursuit of Fontaine. He loves another woman, — perhaps not so beautiful or attractive as you, but still he loves her. I can invent some plausible story to

The Sprightly

account for your coming here. I will introduce Monsieur Duval to you ; he will, I guarantee, offer to send you back to Paris in a superb victoria."

"No, I thank you."

"In a brougham, then. The brougham is very handsome. I will also introduce you as the Comtesse de Fleury — think of that ! — coming from Paris as Madame Fleury in a cab, returning as the Comtesse de Fleury in a splendid private carriage !"

Madame Fleury only laughed a little at this. "I know what your offers to serve me mean, and also how much good-will you owe me."

"Do you doubt, Madame, that I have the very highest regard for you? Try me. There is, just behind the house, a well sixty feet deep, and the water of an icy coldness. Just you jump in, and see how quickly I will jump in after you to save you."

Madame Fleury laughed more than ever as she declined this, and said ban-

Romance of Marsac

teringly, "How could I believe you, considering that when I made you an offer you refused me?"

"Oh, Madame Fleury!" cried Marsac, actually hanging his head, "surely I said my affections were engaged — or — or I asked time for consideration — or I was too young to marry — or something of the sort. I did not put it in that brutally frank fashion in which you represent me."

"Yes, you did," replied Madame Fleury.

"But I like your proposition that I shall meet Monsieur Duval. I know a good deal about him and his family, but I have never seen him, and this is an admirable opportunity."

The world called Marsac a clever man, but at that moment he felt himself to be the greatest lunkhead in existence. What had he mentioned old



The Sprightly

Duval's name for ? And at that very moment the old brewer's curiosity having got the better of his cowardice, he was seen advancing across the terrace. There was no help for it ; and Marsac, with a very bad grace, had to present him to the widow.

Madame Fleury was a perfect mistress of the art of coquetry as applied to elderly gentlemen. She turned her eyes upon Monsieur Duval with a melting glance that would have put a younger man on his guard. Not so Monsieur Duval. It had been a long time since a woman so young and handsome had made eyes at him, and he relished it exceedingly. All his precautions against widows were thrown to the four winds of heaven. Marsac almost groaned aloud as he saw, in five minutes' talk, the widow sailing into the old fellow's good graces. Monsieur Duval offered Madame Fleury a glass of champagne ; and when the two sat down together on a rustic bench, Mar-

Romance of Marsac

sac was so overcome with chagrin at the chance he had given his enemy that he turned his back and walked toward the edge of the terrace.

Madame Fleury improved her opportunity. She drew closer to Monsieur Duval, and from tapping his hand gently with her card-case soon grew to letting her hand rest on his, while she poured into his ears the story of her alleged engagement to Fontaine. According to her account, Fontaine had pursued her, and by his importunity had made her consent to an engagement, which he now refused to fulfil. Her desire for a settlement of the question was simply to avoid scandal; and she dwelt so upon the impossibility of her feeling any affection for so young a man as Fontaine, and the chance she sacrificed of meeting a man old enough to please her, that old Duval began seriously to fear that his own age — sixty-seven — was callow and immature.

The Sprightly

After fifteen minutes of this had gone on, Marsac turned round and glanced at the pair. It was still light enough to see. Madame Fleury had reached the weeping stage. Her left

hand pressed a handkerchief to her eyes,

while Monsieur Duval patting her right was saying tenderly, —

“There, there, don’t cry.”

“Ah, if one has a heart, one must suffer,” murmured



Madame Fleury, with a beautiful little sob, and pressing a lace-trimmed handkerchief to her eyes. “And I have a heart too impulsive, a nature too unsophisticated.”

“I see it, I know it,” was old Duval’s fervent answer. “It is that charming simplicity, that inability to take care of your dear little self, that wins upon me.”

Romance of Marsac

"I am so weak," whispered Madame Fleury, squeezing his hand. "Pray, forgive me. You are so good—I know you are so good."

"Yes, yes, I'll forgive you," Marsac heard old Duval answer, although what he was forgiving her he could not have told to save his life; "and it is a thousand shames that any man should cause that innocent little heart of yours to ache. Now, would n't it be better for all parties if you and Fontaine could separate amicably? And then you might find some other man that you could love." Old Duval, at this, stuck his head sentimentally on one side.

"A mature man, Monsieur Duval," said Madame Fleury, wiping her eyes. "I have had enough of young men. It is impossible for me to feel a passionate regard for any man under sixty-five, at the least."

At this, old Duval assumed a seraphic air, which fairly made Marsac,

The Sprightly

who could see it all, perfectly ill with disgust. Nevertheless, knowing that Madame Fleury and her victim both wished him out of the way, he continued to stand his ground stoutly, walking up and down and whistling loudly and contemptuously, as their voices sank to the sentimental pitch. Presently he saw Madame Fleury take carefully out of her card-case a folded slip of paper, which she read in a low voice to the old brewer. Marsac's heart jumped into his mouth at the thought that it was the marriage contract she was reading.

Monsieur Duval kept looking toward Marsac with the evident desire to get rid of him. Presently he rose and walked over to where Marsac stood, and began to whisper in an embarrassed manner, —

“I say, Monsieur Marsac — pray pardon me for asking — would you — er — ah — be kind enough to tell me — excuse me for inquiring —” Here

Romance of Marsac

the old fellow burst out explosively :
“What the devil are you sticking here for ?”

“Because,” answered Marsac, “I thought you would like the protection of my presence, under the circumstances.”

“Well — I don’t.”

“And then, it occurred to me that you had once suggested I should myself make an offer to Madame Fleury. The lady is here ; also the moon, nightingales, flowers, and other incentives to romance.”

“I withdraw that suggestion, Monsieur Marsac.”

“I have not asked to have it withdrawn, Monsieur Duval.”

“O-o-o-h !” groaned old Duval. Then, suddenly, the absurdity of Marsac’s making love to any woman overcame him, and he burst out, laughing :
“This tickles me under the fifth rib ! Delphine must know it.”

It was now Marsac’s turn to be chagrined.

The Sprightly

“My dear sir,” he cried, “I beg of you not to mention it to Mademoiselle Delphine. It was a mere idle remark. As you have frequently heard me say, my ideal of a woman is a Platonist. I would not marry any other, and no Platonist would marry me; so you perceive the utter baselessness of my language.”

“I do,” answered old Duval, looking much relieved, “and I hope you’ll stick to it. Now, I’ll return to that poor woman yonder;” which he immediately proceeded to do. Within two minutes he said in a loud voice, meant for Marsac to hear, “Come, Madame, let us look for Fontaine in the garden.”

The two walked off, round the corner of the terrace, in a direction opposite to the garden.

Marsac knew in an instant that Madame Fleury’s manœuvre meant a chance to finish up old Duval in private, as a tigress drags her prey off

Romance of Marsac

to the jungle to devour. Marsac then looked carefully around him, and seeing that he was quite unobserved, he took from his pocket the copy of Plato out of which he had been reading to Delphine, and giving the book a vicious kick, sent it spinning to the other end of the terrace. "Villain," "scoundrel," "dolt," "rascal," "idiot," were a few of the expletives that he hurled after the greatest of the Greeks. Then he walked over to the corner of the terrace where the table was, as the best point to command a view of the grounds, and seeing a champagne bottle half emptied was about to drink the balance of the wine in order to save it, when his eye suddenly fell upon a paper lying face upward on the table. It was the contract between Fontaine and Madame Fleury. Marsac could scarcely restrain a shout of joy. He seized it



The Sprightly

and put it in his pocket ; but the next moment he saw Madame Fleury crossing swiftly toward him, and alone.

“Pardon me,” she said in a voice that she tried unavailingly to make calm. “I had a letter here a moment ago, in an envelope. I put the envelope back in my card-case, and thought I had the letter in it, but I have not. Did you see it on the ground anywhere about here?”

“No, Madame,” answered Marsac, looking her steadily in the eye,—a gaze which she as steadily returned.

Madame Fleury began eagerly searching on the ground for the letter, Marsac politely assisting, and lighting matches from time to time to supply the fast-vanishing light. Marsac never had so hard a task in his life as to keep his countenance straight while he fondled the breast-pocket in which lay the document that Madame Fleury searched for so eagerly.

Madame Fleury grew more and

Romance of Marsac

more anxious as she failed to find the paper. They were both tired with stooping, and presently sat down on the ground, facing each other, and each steadily eying the other.



“It is so vexatious to lose a letter,” said Madame Fleury.

“Yes; one might lose a love-letter,” hazarded Marsac.

The Sprightly

"Not you, Monsieur Marsac," replied Madame Fleury, sarcastically.

"True ; I am not a widow," was Marsac's response to this shot.

Then they both began crawling round again, watching each other like cats. An idea came into Marsac's head which almost made him laugh aloud. With a great show of secrecy, he took an old bill of Landais's from his pocket, and began to tear it up into little bits, which he scattered about. Madame Fleury saw the bits, and with as much secrecy as Marsac she began to collect them, smiling to herself: she was convinced that Marsac was tearing up the contract. Presently, Marsac lighting another match dropped it, as if by accident, upon a little pile of these pieces of paper. Madame Fleury pretended to stumble against him, nearly knocking him over, and then deftly secured the half-burned scraps. They each sat on the ground and surveyed the other with an air of triumph.

Romance of Marsac

“Never mind about the letter,” said Madame Fleury with a brilliant smile, clutching her precious scraps in her gloved hand; and then they both laughed.

Madame Fleury rose, and shaking her skirts into place, said, “I have not seen Monsieur Fontaine; but I am not ill-satisfied with my visit.”

“May I have the pleasure of escorting you to your carriage?” asked Marsac.

“No, no!” cried Madame Fleury, hastily; “I have promised Monsieur Duval that he shall put me in the carriage.”

A grinding of wheels on the roadway beneath them and behind the tall hedge was now heard, and Madame Fleury flew down the terrace steps as lightly as the swallow skims the ground; and then Marsac heard a vehicle rattle off. He could hardly wait until the carriage was half-way down the drive before shouting in his delight for Fon-

The Sprightly

taine. But Fontaine and Claire and Delphine were all peeping round the verandah ; and seeing that Madame Fleury was gone, all three came trooping toward Marsac.

“ My dear fellow,” cried Marsac, in a tone of suppressed rapture, as he took out the contract, “ here is that cursed paper. She has gone off with a lot of half-burned scraps of an old bill of Landais’s which she thinks is this contract.”

Fontaine, without a word, hugged Marsac according to custom ; and Claire showed such an evident inclination to do the same that Marsac gave her a truly brotherly embrace, to which Fontaine made no objection.

“ Here,” Marsac said, tearing the paper, “ is half of it for you, Fontaine, and dear Claire ; the other half is for Mademoiselle Delphine and me. And,” he added timidly, “ we will have a marriage contract between us.”

Romance of Marsac

"To be destroyed," answered Delphine, supplying what she supposed Marsac meant.



Then, with laughter and little jokes, and blushes on Claire's part, the contract was destroyed. Never were four

The Sprightly

persons merrier, until Claire suddenly asked, —

“Where is papa?”

At that moment Marsac happened to glance toward the high-road that crossed a hill about a mile off. The sunset glow was still upon the hill, and Marsac's keen eyes recognised Monsieur Duval's victoria, with Madame Fleury in it; and that stout figure in nankeen trousers and gaiters, with the Panama hat on his lap, could be no other than old Duval. The situation flashed upon them. Madame Fleury had bamboozled the old man into taking her back to town in one of his own carriages. Marsac could only point in silent consternation to the carriage. The two girls burst into hysterical tears. Marsac, throwing himself into a chair, groaned aloud; while Fontaine alone, although pretending to be grieved, felt perfectly willing to get rid of Madame Fleury at any price, even by presenting her with

Romance of Marsac

the head of his prospective father-in-law on a charger,—after the manner of Herodias, another enterprising would-be widow of a good many years ago.



The Sprightly

Chapter IV

SOME weeks now passed, but not in the happiness which might have been expected when it was at least certain that Fontaine and Claire could freely love each other. Old Duval had returned late, the night he had driven with Madame Fleury to Paris, and his conduct since had been such as to make his family miserable. Under pretence of having some repairs made in the Passy villa, he had brought them all back to Paris in the heats of May ; and it was tolerably certain that this move was in order to be nearer Madame Fleury. Claire was wretched at this idea ; and although, being a timid girl, she dared not question her father, she had every reason to suspect his

Romance of Marsac

infatuation for the widow who had come so near wrecking Fontaine's life.

As for Fontaine, although he daily and hourly got the benefit of his reputed two millions, all the money he made went like wildfire in the effort to keep up the delusion of a great fortune. He spent his principal, and the world thought he was spending his income. Besides, he feared seriously the effect his deception might have upon Claire when she found it out, — which she must, sometime or other. Then he began to have a morbid apprehension of the real Uncle Maurice turning up ; and last and worst of all, he was now saddled with a reputation for brilliancy founded upon the play, the speech, and the picture, — all Marsac's work, which had been ably sustained by the series of powerful articles signed by him and written by Marsac, — which was simply maddening. Fontaine, who was of an extremely honest

The Sprightly

and simple nature, suffered agonies from this false reputation ; but the embarrassed manner and sickly smile with which he received compliments on his achievements was taken for modesty ; and he passed, therefore, as the most modest as well as the most gifted young man in Paris.

As for Marsac and Delphine, they were tormented in a hell of their own making. Each profoundly in love with the other, and each smarting under the supposed contempt of the other, they grew sharper in their attacks on love and marriage, and suffered accordingly.

One morning, Marsac happening to go to Monsieur Duval's quite early, — for they were now upon the most intimate terms at the house, — he found Fontaine sitting alone in a little drawing-room which communicated with the conservatory and overlooked the trees and fountains in the Luxembourg gardens. The morning papers lay on a table before him ; but Fontaine, sunk

Romance of Marsac

in a deep armchair, was a picture of misery. Marsac, seeing Fontaine's gloomy mood, began jovially and jauntily, —

“I say, old man, what a good time you must have had last night !”

“Why ?” asked Fontaine, sulkily.

“Because you are so blue this morning.”

“You would be blue too, in my place,” answered Fontaine, sullenly. “Here I am, spending every franc I make in the pretence of a fortune I have n't got ; and when I tell the truth to Claire, whom I love from the bottom of my heart, she will hate me for the fraud I have practised upon her.”

This view had not occurred so forcibly to Marsac before. He took a turn about the room, and then said in an agitated voice, “Is it possible that Uncle Maurice was not a happy invention ?”



The Sprightly

“Happy invention! Damn Uncle Maurice!” almost shouted Fontaine, burying his head in the pillows of the great chair. “Marsac, you are the best fellow in the world; but you have been just a little too clever this time. Besides giving me a fictitious fortune, you have made me out to be the most brilliant man in Paris; and I can tell you it is simply killing me, trying to live up to the character. If that picture had n’t been so deuced good; if that speech had n’t been so devilish funny; if that play had n’t been so damnably bright,—ah, hell and all its furies!”

Fontaine rolled about his chair in anguish, while Marsac sat silent and appalled at the result of his own ingenuity.

“And,” cried Fontaine, desperately, dashing his hand to his forehead, “suppose that infernal old Uncle Maurice of mine should turn up from America?”

Romance of Marsac

“No, no !” said Marsac, “that is impossible. No, no, fate has not such a cruel blow in store for us. It is just as rational to suppose that the other uncles and aunts I gave you should materialise and come to life in Paris — ”

A knock at the door startled them both. It was an ordinary enough knock, such as might precede a footman or a tradesman ; but to Marsac and Fontaine, whose nerves had been a good deal wrought upon in the last few exciting months, it sounded like the crack of doom.

Both of them sat with pale faces, and neither could say the ordinary words, “Come in.” But the person knocking came in, after a moment. He was a little old man, a shabby little old man, clutching a rusty travelling-bag in his trembling hands. He stood in the centre of the room, looking about awkwardly and timidly.



The Sprightly

Marsac felt as if he were frozen to his chair. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could feel his hair rising on his head. Not Frankenstein, when his monster came to life, could have felt more horror. Fontaine, with one wild look, seemed inspired with the motion that was denied Marsac, and darted into the conservatory.

The old man advanced, still holding on to his shabby bag. "I am told," he said hesitatingly, "that this is the house of Monsieur Duval, and I would find my nephew, Monsieur Auguste Fontaine, here. The lackeys below did n't want to let me up: I suppose I am not so well dressed as I ought to be. I am Auguste's uncle, just from America. I am Monsieur Maurice Fontaine."

Had the arch-fiend appeared in person, with a tail and hoofs and horns, and said calmly, "I am Beelzebub, Prince of Darkness, just from Hades," he could not have disconcerted Marsac

Romance of Marsac

more. He rose to his feet, but found himself incapable of speech.

This, then, was Uncle Maurice ! Like the foolish man who let the genie out of the trunk, the apparition had grown and grown, until it was now unmanageable. And here was the substance, the actual man of that figment of Marsac's imagination ; here was Uncle Maurice ! Marsac felt a singular kind of acquaintanceship and even kinship with Uncle Maurice ; and through it all he had a dim sensation of pity for the poor old man standing there, holding on apparently to all his few worldly possessions, and looking so deprecating, so apologetic, so blankly disappointed.

Uncle Maurice began to speak again, trying to smile, but his eyes meanwhile filling with tears. " Perhaps I counted too much on this home-coming ; and — and — it 's ridiculous, you know, for a poor old man to expect a very warm welcome. I have n't had a

The Sprightly

single hand held out to me yet, since I landed.”

A wave of pity swept over Marsac. Terrible as this *dénouement* was, wreck and havoc as it made, the old man’s disappointment touched him ; and Marsac had one of the best hearts in the world.

“ My dear Monsieur Fontaine,” he said, advancing, and trying to speak in a natural voice, “ you shall not say that again. Here is my hand, and I guarantee that Fontaine, who is my best friend, my brother in fact, will not fail to welcome you. I have often heard him speak of you, and in the kindest terms.”

“ Did he ? ” asked the old man, delightedly grasping Marsac’s hand. “ That was good of the boy ! I dare-say he heard that false report that I was dead.”

“ He did,” answered Marsac, “ and he put on mourning for you, and did not go into society for several weeks.”

Romance of Marsac

That seemed to overjoy the poor old man. "Good lad, good fellow! I'll not forget that. There's no such proof of real respect. And you — What is your name, may I ask?"

"Marsac, — and at your service."

"Well, Monsieur Marsac, since you are so kind, tell me more about my nephew. You know he is my only near living relative."

"He is a noble fellow; and he is engaged to be married to the daughter of the owner of this house, — a lovely girl, Mademoiselle Claire Duval."

The old man seated himself, and with his precious bag between his knees drank in eagerly Marsac's every word. Marsac saw the advisability of preparing Monsieur Maurice Fontaine for the state of affairs that he must presently find out.

"When Fontaine went in mourning for you — which I am glad to see there was no occasion for —"

"And I am glad too. Go on —"

The Sprightly

“Some miscreant started the report that you had left him a fortune. It got into the newspapers, and everybody believed it, — even Claire. Fontaine — foolishly, I think — did not confide to her frankly how it was; and he was telling me just now his distress at having to confess his deception to Claire. She is a sweet girl, though, and I believe his confession will not alter her affection in the least. I will go and fetch Fontaine.”

Marsac went into the conservatory. There stood Fontaine, as white as a sheet, and wild-eyed.

“Come in and see your uncle,” whispered Marsac.

“I can’t — I won’t,” answered Fontaine, desperately.

“But you must. The best and only thing now is to face the music. And, besides, you would feel sympathy for the old man, — he is so humble, so gentle, and seems so grateful for even the small kindness I have shown him.”

Romance of Marsac

“He has wrecked my life,” was Fontaine’s angry reply.

“Rubbish ! you are twenty times better off for him. Come along ;” and Fontaine never having resisted Marsac in his life could not do so now, and went obediently into the drawing-room to greet affectionately the man whose very existence he conceived was utterly disastrous to him.

Uncle Maurice was charmed with the reception he got from Fontaine, and immediately began joking him about Claire. “And she thought you had a rich old uncle who had died and left you a fortune — ha ! ha !” he chuckled. “Well, perhaps, after all, you will be just as happy when the truth is known.”

Fontaine could scarcely stand this ; but luckily Uncle Maurice concluded he would make himself a little presentable before being introduced to Claire.

“I have some better clothes than these,” he said apologetically, “though

The Sprightly

I have n't them in my bag with me."

"Never mind," said Marsac, cordially ; "go to our quarters, just around the corner ; here are my keys. Get anything you want, — linen, cigars, liqueurs, — and come back very soon, so we can present you to Claire and her cousin Delphine. We will wait for you here."

"Let me assist you," said Fontaine, trying to take the old bag.

"No, no, no!" cried Uncle Maurice, determinedly ; "I've got to hold on to that, — it has all my little savings in it." And the old man went off, promising to return in half an hour.

Left alone, Marsac and Fontaine avoided each other's gaze, and said not a word. Language could not express the depth, the height, the breadth of the catastrophe that had befallen them. Yet they were undeniably better off than if Uncle Maurice had never lived.

Romance of Marsac

After a long and painful pause, Marsac spoke.

"You must confess at once to Claire; and I don't believe it will change her affection for you."



Fontaine had no time to reply, for at that moment Claire and Delphine entered the room together. It was plain that they were distressed about

The Sprightly

something, and Delphine's first words were, —

“We are in very great trouble.”

“All is not bright for us, either,” gloomily replied Marsac.

“Ours is a very real trouble,” began Claire, half crying. “We have found out that papa spends half his time with Madame Fleury. He writes to her, and to-day came a bill for thirty bouquets in three weeks for her. If he should marry her — oh, the thought is too dreadful!” and Claire burst into tears.

Fontaine took her hand tenderly, and led her into the conservatory.

Marsac and Delphine were now left alone. Marsac for once was completely unnerved, but he managed to hide it from Delphine.

“What do you suppose Auguste and Claire find to say to each other in these tremendously long private interviews?” she asked, wishing from the bottom of her heart that Marsac would show

Romance of Marsac

some inclination toward long private interviews with her. "I have a great mind to interrupt this one."

"Pray, don't," cried Marsac, eagerly; and then with a sickly attempt at a return to his old manner, he said, "Let them be happy while they can. Soon they will be married, and then—"

A dismal shaking of the head finished the sentence.

Every word went like a knife to Delphine's tortured heart; but not to be outdone, she flippantly replied,

"As far as those two go, Plato might never have lived, and Socrates might never have died!"

Now, for a long time, ever since Marsac had known and loved Delphine, the name of Plato had become peculiarly odious to him. He considered that a large part of the misery he was enduring was directly to be laid at the door of that philosopher, and he had



The Sprightly

often ardently wished to himself that Plato and not Socrates had been forced to drink the hemlock. He could not forbear saying bitterly, —

“Do you know, Mademoiselle, there are persons who loathe and hate and despise and revile and scorn and condemn the divine Plato?”

Marsac’s tone of ineffable disgust when he said “divine” might have enlightened Delphine; but it did not. “I am afraid our two friends in the conservatory do not appreciate him,” she answered, smiling. “I dare say Claire is asking Auguste the very same question that Eve asked Adam in the Garden of Eden,—is she the only woman he has ever loved?”

It occurred to Marsac that it would be well to prepare Delphine for what Fontaine actually was revealing at that moment; so drawing his chair nearer, he said confidentially, “Mademoiselle, I can tell you exactly what they are talking about at this moment.

Romance of Marsac

What would you think if I were to tell you that Fontaine's Uncle Maurice was not dead, after all, but has just arrived at our lodgings, and will very soon present himself in this room?"

Delphine's mouth came open with astonishment, and her first question when she had recovered from the shock of her surprise was, "And how about the fortune?"

Marsac shook his head lugubriously. "I can tell you nothing. That fortune is involved in the deepest mystery. There are indications of a plot the most extraordinary you can conceive. I know nothing, except that Monsieur Maurice Fontaine is alive, and is in Paris, and will be here shortly." And then, to divert her from so perilous a subject, he said, "But we are consumed with anxiety regarding Monsieur Duval and the Comtesse de Fleury. It will be terrible for you and Claire if she succeeds in capturing Monsieur Duval."

The Sprightly

Delphine's answer was artfully contrived: "If that dreadful woman should succeed in marrying my uncle, this could no longer be a home for me."

Here was an opportunity at once for Marsac to declare himself, if he had a spark of tenderness for her. The tenderness, amounting to adoration, was there; but Marsac — the ready, the witty, the glib, the daring — was silent and abashed in the presence of the master-passion. His silence, which was really one of deep emotion, was naturally misunderstood by Delphine. Just as he had nerved himself to take what he thought a desperate chance, by telling her of his love, her face hardened, she deliberately turned her back to him, and picking up some fancy-work on the table, seated herself at it.

There was nothing left for Marsac but the newspaper which Fontaine had dropped. He took it, and for half an

Romance of Marsac

hour no sound was heard except the rattle of the sheets as they were turned. Delphine stitched in silent anger and disappointment.

It seemed fated that all the persons whom Marsac and Fontaine particularly did not wish to see at M. Duval's house should turn up that morning, for within five minutes of Marsac's and Delphine's latest misunderstanding a footman appeared to announce another startling arrival. The man usually maintained the stolid countenance of his tribe, but on this occasion he wore a grin like a rat-trap. "M'sieu Marsac," he said, almost laughing in Marsac's gloomy face, "here's a — person —"

"A *lady*, if you please," proclaimed a loud voice, as Madame Schmid marched in, shoving the footman unceremoniously out of the way.

Poor Marsac's nerves were sufficiently unstrung by Uncle Maurice's arrival, and Madame Schmid's seemed

The Sprightly

likely to finish him. But she was such a good-hearted creature, and in spite of having, figuratively, dragged Fontaine and himself around by the hair of their heads, had washed and scrubbed for them so faithfully, that Marsac could not find it in his heart to receive her coldly. As for Madame Schmid, Marsac's delightful impudence had won its way into her honest heart, and she had come to do him a great service. Her errand not being a professional one, she wore a gorgeous red bonnet, all flowers; a green mantle, all spangles; a purple gown, all stripes; and, with a yellow parasol, looked something like a bird of paradise.

"Here you are," she cried, a broad smile on her handsome face. "Just as impudent as ever, I warrant. If I get out of this room without being kissed —"

Delphine, looking on in amazement, became pale at this; while Marsac turned blue in the face.

Romance of Marsac

“I perceive I am in the way,” murmured Delphine, in a scarcely audible voice, and made for the door.

“Mademoiselle — I implore — ” Marsac got this far when Delphine slammed the door in his face.

“Is the young lady jealous ? ” asked Madame Schmid, delightedly.

“I am afraid not,” was Marsac’s dejected reply.

“Well, M’sieu,” began Madame Schmid, with an air of importance, “I have come to tell you and that pretty boy Fontaine something you will like to hear. In the first place, Madame Fleury is coming here this morning.”

“Charming ! Ha ! ha ! Fontaine will be rapturously happy.”

“Wait a minute. Don’t laugh in that dismal manner. She is determined, of course, to marry M. Duval ; but she thinks, by coming to this house, she can force Fontaine to give her money rather than betray her presence to his *fiancée*. Well, I found this out, — no

The Sprightly

matter how, — and I said this morning to Fleury — ”

“ To Fleury ! ”

“ To Fleury. He is no more dead than you or I. He has been living at my house for a month past. I said, ‘ I won’t keep your secret any longer. I’ll tell your wife that you are alive.’ Oh, he cried like a baby at that.”

Marsac seized her hands, and could only cry breathlessly, “ Go on ! go on ! ”

“ It was this way. About a month ago Fleury came walking into my place and asked for lodgings. I said, ‘ Why, you were drowned.’ He said, ‘ I was n’t.’ I said, ‘ Your wife thinks so.’ He said, ‘ I hope she will keep on thinking so.’ I had n’t the heart to betray the poor creature, so I said nothing until I heard about this new move of his wife’s, but then I determined to tell you ; and I have him around the corner, in a wine-shop, where he is crying and drinking ; and you must come with me.”

Romance of Marsac

Two minutes later Delphine saw, from an upper window, Madame Schmid parading down the street, with Marsac gallantly holding the yellow parasol over her red bonnet, and attending her as if she were a duchess. That, then, was the woman Marsac loved !

Delphine, pale and agonised, returned to the drawing-room.

There came a rustle of draperies from the conservatory, and Claire flitted in with Fontaine. One look at their happy faces told that Uncle Maurice's fortune had made no figure in their love affair.

"What do you think, Delphine," asked Claire, with her hand still lying in Fontaine's, — "this foolish boy has not a fortune, after all ; and he has known it for some time, and dared not tell me. It seems that when the report of his Uncle Maurice's death came, some one started the story in the newspapers about the fortune, and

The Sprightly

Auguste did not have the nerve to contradict it. Besides, it might have been true, for he had an Uncle Maurice in America. And this very morning Uncle Maurice arrived in Paris, and was directed here to find Auguste. And Auguste says the old man looks very poor and friendless, but cheery and glad to get back to France ; and dear, kind Monsieur Marsac was so good to the old man, and made Auguste kind to him too. So he has gone to their apartment to make ready to come and see us. I shall be just as nice to him as I can be, and I shall make papa be the same."

"Claire, you have the dearest heart in the world," burst out Delphine, generously forgetting her own misery ; "and I love and respect you the more for not caring whether Auguste has a fortune or not."

"But with his talents," answered Claire, proudly, "a fortune will be his. We can live well enough on his pic-

Romance of Marsac

tures, his plays, and his articles in the newspapers."

Fontaine's effort at a cheerful grin when this was said was piteous to behold. Just then the footman again entered and handed him a card. One look was enough. "It is Madame Fleury!" he cried. "Don't let her up."

But he was too late. Madame Fleury walked into the drawing-room on the heels of her messenger and said to the servant, in an authoritative manner, "Take my card to Monsieur Duval."

Never had the gentle Claire showed haughtiness to any human creature before; but when face to face with Madame Fleury, she drew her slight figure up, and in a tone of quiet disdain said, "I think, Madame, that I — my father's daughter — have some rights in this house; and I forbid my servant to take your card."

"And I think," suavely replied

The Sprightly

Madame Fleury, "that your father, master of his house, has some rights here too ; so —" A look at the footman finished the sentence. The man went out with the card.

Claire, with a heightened colour, turned to Delphine, saying, " Shall we withdraw ? "

" By no means," answered Delphine, coolly ; " that would indeed be a surrender." They both therefore stood their ground.

Fontaine, who was glad to keep out of the *mêlée*, had prudently kept in the background during this ; but Madame Fleury would not let him rest there.

" Monsieur Fontaine," she asked in her smoothest voice, " do you remember a certain document which we both signed, referring to the 15th of May ? "

" I do, to my eternal sorrow," was Fontaine's reply ; but before he could say anything more, Monsieur Duval bustled in, looking flurried, nervous,

Romance of Marsac

but elated with the elation of a stupid old man who finds himself an object of interest to a handsome young woman.

“Good morning, Madame,” he cried. “I am delighted to see you.”

“It is more than your daughter and niece were,” answered Madame Fleury, smiling.

“How is this?” sternly asked Monsieur Duval, wheeling around upon the two girls. Claire, who dearly loved her father, could not utter a word; but Delphine was equal to the situation.

“Of course we were not delighted to see her; and, uncle — pardon me — but a man of your age should know better —”

“Monsieur Duval,” interrupted Madame Fleury, “your age is one of your greatest charms in my eyes.”

“And yet,” coolly continued Delphine, “Monsieur Fontaine’s youth was no objection to him. Anything between the cradle and the grave seems to suit this — person.”

The Sprightly

Monsieur Duval felt called upon to say reprovingly, "Delphine!" but the next moment he weakened and muttered, "I wish Marsac were here. He is the only one that can manage all of you!"

"I wish he were too," said Madame Fleury. "I was just speaking of a valuable paper I took with me to Passy that evening I was there. By an unfortunate oversight on my part Monsieur Marsac got hold of it, and tore it into bits, which he afterward tried to burn up. I saved the scraps, but I was not able to put the charred pieces together. Therefore I gave an expert one hundred and fifty francs to restore it. He has just returned it to me, and I have not yet had a chance to open it; but I will do it now, and I would like Monsieur Marsac to see how much cleverer I am than he is."

Madame Fleury produced an envelope from her card-case, tore it open, and then stood petrified for a moment.

Romance of Marsac

"Why — it is — it is —" she stammered.

"A bill of Landais the tailor," maliciously put in Fontaine. "That is what he tore up."



"And what you paid one hundred and fifty francs to have restored," Delphine chimed in.

"Madame Fleury," said Fontaine, determinedly, "I have put up with this hounding of me as long as I intend to.

The Sprightly

I shall to-day report it to the police, and ask protection."

Instead of flying into a rage at this, Madame Fleury executed a masterly *coup*. Pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, she almost fell upon old Duval's shoulder, crying, "Monsieur Duval, will you stand by and see me so affronted?"

"No, Madame Fleury," sturdily answered Monsieur Duval, with his arm half round her waist. "Never mind, Madame Fleury. If he reports you to the police, Madame Fleury, he will have to reckon with me, Madame Fleury. I know I'm old enough to be your father, but if you'll marry me, Madame Fleury, you'll find me a great improvement on that rascally count you married first; and you may be Madame Duval any day you like."

At this a faint shriek burst from the two girls; and Fontaine, who had not dreamed the old man capable of such folly, could n't repress an exclamation.

Romance of Marsac

However, he took Claire's hand, and said to her tenderly, —

“Well, my dear one, the only thing for you to do now is to trust me, and become my wife at the earliest moment possible.”

Claire felt at that moment as if she had but one earthly dependence; she clung to Fontaine, and weeping said, “I will marry you whenever you like; for I cannot, and never will, countenance my father's marriage to this creature.”

“And even I would marry to escape living with this woman,” said Delphine, in much agitation. “I would marry Monsieur Marsac, or commit suicide even, rather than live in the house with her.”

Delphine was scarcely conscious of what she said, but a gleam of wicked amusement in Madame Fleury's eyes showed her that she had made a dangerous slip.



The Sprightly

Steps were heard outside in the hall as if of three or even four persons ; but when the door opened, only Marsac entered. He wore a look of jaunty expectation, which seemed only to be increased by the startling spectacle before him, — Madame Fleury holding on to Monsieur Duval's arm, the old man puffing, blowing, smiling, and frowning with alternate spasms of rage and delight ; Claire clinging to Fontaine and in great distress ; while Delphine, pale and defiant, stood alone in the centre of the group. It was one of the most delicious moments of Madame Fleury's life.

When Marsac, raising his eyebrows, inquired, "What is this I see ?" Madame Fleury cut in before even Monsieur Duval could reply, —

"You see the betrothal between Monsieur Duval and me."

Marsac's wide, handsome mouth came open as if it were on hinges. His enjoyment of the situation seemed

Romance of Marsac

intense ; and Fontaine, Claire, and Delphine were all astounded at his heartless amusement over a catastrophe so ruinous to all of them. He only said, with a grin, after surveying the scene for a minute or two, —

“And are you quite certain, Madame, of carrying out your plan ?”

“Perfectly certain,” responded Monsieur Duval, pompously ; “and she will find her good old Duval a better husband than that rascally count she married first and buried afterward.”

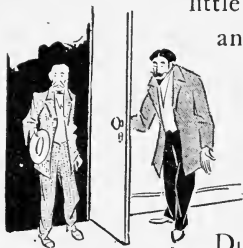
“But did she bury him ?” asked Marsac, and paused to get the whole effect of this. It was magical on Madame Fleury. She clenched her teeth ; her eyes flashed fire ; but she held on stoutly to Monsieur Duval, who grew white about the chops. Marsac, after coolly surveying his audience, announced, —

“I have the honour of presenting to you Madame Fleury’s husband !”

With that, he threw the door open

The Sprightly

with a grand flourish, and in walked one of the most weazened, cadaverous little men who ever stepped, and behind him Madame Schmid's rubicund countenance and rotund figure.



Madame Fleury could not repress a cry of rage, and Monsieur

Duval dropped her arm as if it was red-hot. Fleury, who seemed not at all abashed by his surroundings, looked calmly about. Monsieur Duval was the first to recover his voice, and his disgusted exclamation was, —

“That creature a count !”

“I did not say he was a count,” corrected Marsac. “I merely said, by way of making things agreeable, that Madame Fleury was a countess.”

Madame Fleury's reply to this was one word, uttered in a tone of concentrated hatred, “Wretch !”

“Is that all the thanks I get for restoring to you your long-lost hus-

Romance of Marsac

band?" said Marsac in an injured voice. "Oh, the ingratitude that is in this world!"

Fleury, meanwhile, seemed determined to assert himself. "I'm not a count," he said; "and that lady yonder," indicating Madame Fleury, "always turned up her nose at me; but I am not as insignificant as she would have you believe. I have a standing offer from the medical school of seventy-five francs for my skeleton as soon as I peg out."

"I wish it were available at this moment," cried Madame Fleury.

"There!" said Fleury, "I knew she would n't be glad to see me; and I told this gentleman so. But I don't know that I am very glad to see her. I have n't had so peaceable and quiet a time since I was married as when I was dead."

Here Madame Schmid was bound to be heard; "I said to Fleury, said I—"

"Hold!" said old Duval, advancing,

The Sprightly

"I know this person. It is the Baroness Schmid."

"*Baroness Schmid! Comte de Fleury!* Oh, this is too comical!" screamed Madame Schmid, laughing.

"Who wanted to marry Monsieur Fontaine," continued old Duval, determinedly.

"No, no!" cried Delphine, almost beside herself with jealousy. "She wants to marry Monsieur Marsac."

"*I want to marry that pretty boy, Fontaine!*" bawled Madame Schmid, finding her voice. "*I want to marry M'sieu Marsac! I want their washing, that's all. I'm a washerwoman.*"

"Ladies and gentlemen," implored Marsac, "all can be explained at a future day; but the fact remains that this is Monsieur Fleury."

Old Duval's face was a study during this, and he began to stammer, "I—I—don't think we can be married, Madame."

The hopelessness of her situation

Romance of Marsac

was plain to Madame Fleury. She prepared to depart from the house she had intended to preside over. She gave a glance of speechless contempt around the circle, including every member of it, and ending at Fontaine, who had taken no part in the *dénouement*, but had watched it in amazed but delighted silence.

“Monsieur Duval,” she said in a hard voice, “I am truly sorry I cannot marry you. As for Monsieur Fontaine I would only have married him for lack of something better. The indignation of the two young ladies against me seemed wholly devised to marry themselves off. Mademoiselle Claire at once announced her willingness to marry Monsieur Fontaine ; while Mademoiselle Delphine took occasion to say that she would marry Monsieur Marsac or commit suicide,—each a terrible alternative. For Monsieur Marsac, I can say that he has concocted and conducted the most extraordinary

The Sprightly

fraud ever perpetrated upon you. I am firmly convinced there never was an Uncle Maurice, and the story of his death and his fortune was a pure invention of Marsac's, from beginning to end."

"The story of his death, I grant you, I was mistaken about," blandly responded Marsac ; "but as to there being an Uncle Maurice —"

Marsac stepped to the door, opened it, and Uncle Maurice, evidently bubbling over with delight, entered, still holding on to the seedy old bag.

"Allow me," said Marsac, with a low bow, "to present to you all, ladies and gentlemen, Monsieur Maurice Fontaine, late of New York, and from henceforth from Paris."

Madame Fleury seemed literally stunned by the sight of the little old man, who, without noticing the sensation made by his appearance, went all round the circle, shaking hands, not forgetting Madame Fleury, who gave

Romance of Marsac

him her hand like a woman in a nightmare, and then he asked, —

“Where is my little niece?”

Claire ran up to him, looked smilingly into his face and said, “Here I am, Uncle Maurice!”

The old man's gratification was touching. He kissed her cheek, he patted her hair and stroked her hand again and again; but he never let go of his bag. Monsieur Duval gazed mechanically at Uncle Maurice, while Delphine's cordiality was second only to Claire's.

“Ah,” cried Uncle Maurice, beginning and shaking hands all round for the second time, “you can't imagine how kindly I was received by these two fine fellows. They didn't mind my shabby clothes; they treated me nobly. I sha'n't forget it, my lads.”

Madame Fleury at this found her tongue. “He doesn't look as if his acquaintance would be much of an

The Sprightly

acquisition to his family," she said scornfully.

"Eh?" asked Uncle Maurice, and he seemed stung by her remark. "Well," he continued with an unexpected twinkle in his eyes, "that's as may be. I have in this bag a million francs' worth of United States government bonds, — a part of what I made in that noble country. I intended some of it for my nephew, provided he received me kindly. I am proud and happy to say he did so, when he thought I had n't a decent coat to my back; so I'll give him — let me see — I might as well do the thing handsomely — half a million francs, so he can get married." He opened the bag and took out a parcel. "Monsieur Duval, you are a man of affairs; you know what these are."

The sight of the securities seemed to wake Monsieur Duval up. He examined the parcel carefully, while Fontaine brokenly expressed his thanks,

Romance of Marsac

and Claire kissed the old man with tears in her eyes.

“And, Auguste,” she cried generously, “Monsieur Marsac must share in our good fortune ; you know he has shared everything with you.”

“Indeed he shall,” replied Fontaine, clasping Marsac’s hand.

“Perhaps you don’t know,” said Madame Fleury to Uncle Maurice, stopping in a somewhat precipitate flight toward the door, “that it was that Marsac who started the story of your giving Fontaine a fortune.”

“Did you then — ha ! ha !” Uncle Maurice seemed tickled at the idea.

“Yes,” replied Marsac, modestly ; “when it was reported that you were dead, I determined to give Fontaine every franc of your fortune ; and I gave you, sir, a very good character besides. I endowed you with every virtue of a man and a gentleman ; and it seems I was clairvoyant.”

Uncle Maurice laughed excessively

The Sprightly

at this, and handing a smaller roll out of the old bag to Marsac, he said :
“ Well, I would like to have you for a nephew too, for you were no less kind than my nephew, and with less obligation ; so there is a hundred thousand francs for you, — a mere nest-egg.

A fellow as clever as you can always make his way in the world.”



Marsac was overwhelmed by the old man's generosity ; and the silence, as he stood grasping Uncle Maurice's hand, was only broken by the slamming of the door as Madame Fleury

rushed out, dragging the unhappy Fleury after her. As Monsieur Duval watched her exit, he said slowly, —

“ Perhaps it is better, after all, that I am not in Fleury's shoes.”

“ A great deal better,” remarked Uncle Maurice, solemnly ; “ she's too much for you, Monsieur Duval.”

This great truth seemed to strike

Romance of Marsac

the old brewer with much force; the more so when Madame Schmid said, pointing after Fleury's departing figure: "That man weighed near two hundred pounds when he married that woman, and I believe he has lost not less than a pound a day since that time; and you see what he is now. Well, I must be going. M'sieu Marsac, when you and that pretty young lady" — pointing to Delphine — "are married, please to give me your washing. The same to you, M'sieu Fontaine, and your young lady."

Marsac was so embarrassed by this speech that he remained perfectly silent; but Fontaine escorted Madame Schmid to the door with profuse thanks.

Old Duval still seemed dazed about the dead and the living Uncle Maurice. At every mention of the supposititious Uncle Maurice the real one would shake with merriment.

"So Monsieur Marsac made up the yarn," said Monsieur Duval, dubiously.

The Sprightly

“The noble romance, you mean,” replied Marsac. “My invention of Uncle Maurice ranks with Orestes, with Pantagruel, with Don Quixote, with all those splendid creations of the imagination that are as real to us as you, sir, are,” to Uncle Maurice. “I endowed you with every virtue, and I find, happily, that I have only done you justice.” Marsac folded his arms, and assumed a look of triumphant virtue.

“What a clever fellow! what a very clever fellow!” chuckled Uncle Maurice, delightedly.

“And I also invented two other rich uncles and an aged and decrepit aunt,—all of whom were to make Fontaine their heir,” added Marsac; at which Uncle Maurice nearly went into convulsions of enjoyment.

“I used to think,” said Monsieur Duval, “that Monsieur Marsac with his plays and his paint-pots and his

Romance of Marsac

writing and his fiddling was a great fool, but I have changed my opinion."

"A thousand thanks," replied Marsac, with dignity, — "not only for myself, but for all the other fools who write or paint or fiddle, and thereby add to the gaiety of nations."

"Well, well, well," said Monsieur Duval, hastily, "let us sit down and talk things over."

So he and Uncle Maurice and Fontaine and Claire formed a group and sat down. Delphine, who had taken but little part in the proceedings, but whose heart had swelled at Marsac's triumph, walked toward the embrasure of a window. Marsac followed her. The curtain fell behind them, and they were as much alone as if in another room. Outside the window the fountains plashed in the May air; the day was all blue and gold. The trees in the Luxembourg gardens rustled softly; it was a day for making love.

Presently Marsac spoke timidly :

The Sprightly

“Mademoiselle, I recall some words of that she-devil, Madame Fleury. She said you had declared you would commit suicide, or — or — marry me, if — Tell me, what did you mean?”

“Just what I said,” answered Delphine, with a beautiful blush.

“Did you mean that either fate was equally dreadful?”

“No.”

“Or, perhaps, that — I have a second thought, but I am afraid to mention it.”

“Second thoughts are always best,” demurely replied Delphine.

And then there was a scene that would have broken the heart of a Platonist. A few murmured words, a hand-clasp — and Delphine lay in Marsac’s arms. A bird was singing in a tree outside the window, and a bird also sang in their two happy hearts.

So deep was their ecstasy that they did not hear steps approach, nor the curtain softly drawn, and they were

Romance of Marsac

wakened from their dream in Paradise by a shout of laughter. Fontaine and Claire, Uncle Maurice and Monsieur Duval, were laughing uproariously, and gazing at the two apostles of platonic love, the relentless enemies of matrimony, — Marsac with his arm round Delphine's waist, and his handsome head almost touching her bright hair. Old Duval grunted out one word, —

“Plato!”

“Let Plato go to the devil!” cried Marsac. “If ever I meet the old scoundrel on the other side of the Styx, I promise to kick him all over the lower regions for having deprived me for one hour of the sweet knowledge of Delphine's love.”

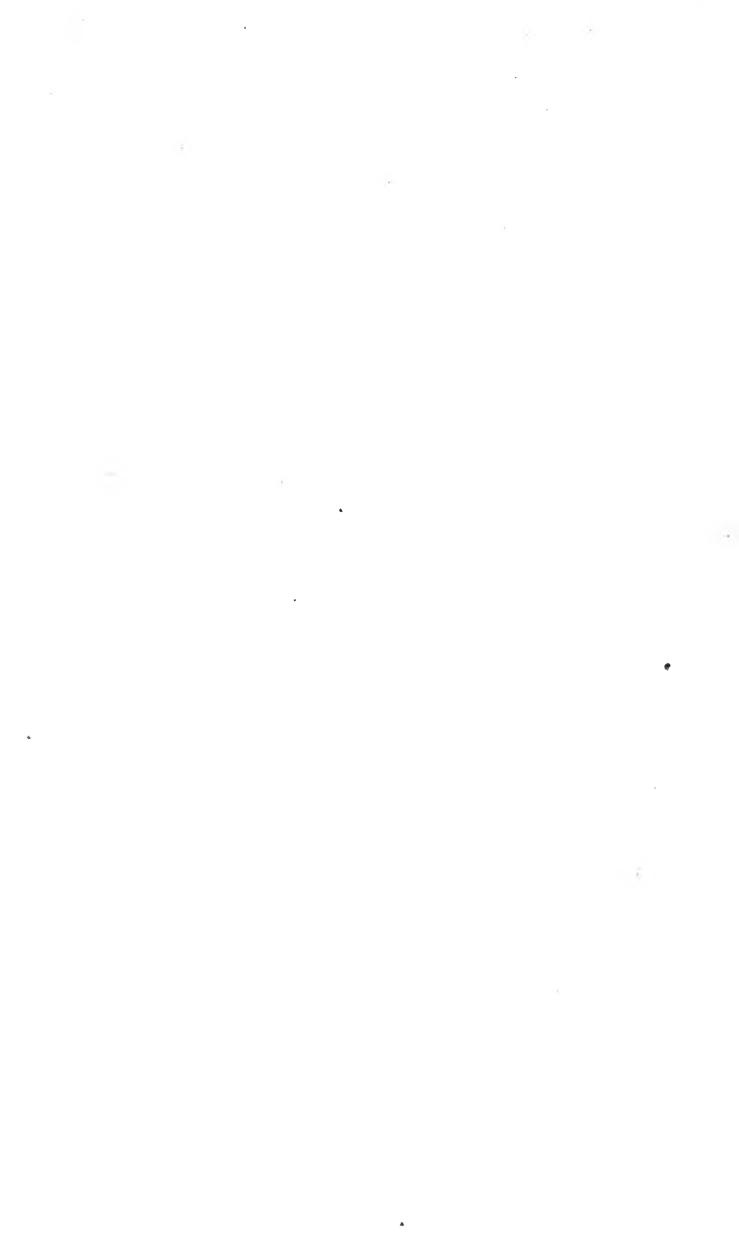
“Hurrah!” cried Uncle Maurice. “To perdition with the rascal Plato!”

“He is there already, I hope,” shouted Fontaine, dancing in his delight. “Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! Marsac loves and is beloved!”

The Romance of Marsac

“And I can tell you one thing,” interrupted Monsieur Duval, with ponderous solemnity, “that Marsac is not such a fool after all !”





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